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RALPH READY, THE HOTEL BOY DETECTIVE; Or, TRACKING THE FOXES TO EARTH.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "BOB ROCKETT, THE BANK RUNNER," "BOB ROCKETT, THE BOY DODGER," "WILL WILDFIRE," "DARK PAUL," ETC., ETC.



RALPH COULD CONTAIN HIMSELF NO LONGER. HE LAUGHED MORE UPROARIOUSLY THAN HE HAD AT THE IRATE JUDGE, AT THIS SECOND APPARITION.

Ralph Ready,

The Hotel Boy Detective;

OR,

Tracking the Foxes to Earth.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "JOLLY JIM'S JOB," "THE YOUNG SLEUTHS," "DICK DASHAWAY," "DETECTIVE DICK," "WILL WILDFIRE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

NEW GUESTS AT THE GRAND CENTRAL.

"HEY there, Mike! where are you going with that trunk? You are taking it to the wrong room."

"Sure, an' the number was 294," sturdily answered the Irish porter. "Is it meself as iver made a mistake? Ye'll be after tellin' me next that I'm not up to my business."

"If blundering is your business you are up to it, that's sure," answered the first speaker. "I'll bet a pony you've got the trunks mixed, and I'm going to see."

"Faix, and it's little I care," was the stolid reply. "Mike O'Flaherty carried trunks afore ye was born, and he's a bit too old to be larnt his trade by a boy."

The porter walked on with the heavy trunk, without further heed to the comments of his youthful questioner.

"If anybody can get more blunders into a square five minutes, I'd like to see him, that's all," declared the latter. "There'll be fun yet about those trunks, if I don't get the thing straightened."

The speaker was a well-built, good-looking youth of some eighteen or nineteen years of age. The hair fell in dark clusters over his brow, his eyes were black and keen, his mouth firm yet marked by lines of humor. He was evidently well calculated to make his way in the world.

The place in which he stood was a corridor of the Grand Central Hotel—a huge pile of brick and stone, with rooms enough to accommodate a regiment, and celebrated far and wide for the richness of its bill-of-fare, and—the magnitude of its charges!

The youth had a somewhat undefined position in this establishment. He was a sort of *aide-de-camp* to the hotel clerk, and was expected to keep a general sharp eye on the comings and goings inside the extensive caravansary. He was not exactly a private detective, though his duties tended in that direction.

He sharply turned and made his way toward the stairs, determined to straighten up this matter of the trunks, which he was sure Mike had got mixed.

Before reaching this location, however, he was accosted by an old gentleman, who was wandering distractedly through the corridor.

This personage was dressed in a dusty brown suit of ancient pattern, and wore a wide-brimmed slouch hat driven down over his eyes. He was waving his arms with energetic gestures.

"Bless my eyes!" he exclaimed, "but I'd sooner be cut adrift in a wildcat jungle, and left to scratch my way out, than in such a topsy-turvy prairie-dog town as this. Can you get me the loan of a hatchet, boy?"

"What do you want with a hatchet?"

"To blaze my way out of this rat-hole. Here I left my room five minutes ago, and I might as well hunt a jack rabbit in a ten-mile prairie as try to find it again. I've walked up and down stairs and tunnels enough to make a good coal-mine, till my legs feel as if they were tied in a bow-knot. See here, young man, what's to become of the guests if a fire was to get started in this concern?"

"That's all provided for," answered the youth gravely. "There are stairs and elevators and fire-escapes."

"Very neat! But what good is that to a chap in the seventeenth story, within half a mile of heaven, I'd like to know? It would be easier here to step onto the clouds than to the solid ground. And as for your stairs, they can beat Bannager at twisting around, and landing nowhere."

"There's a balloon-corps attached to the upper floors," replied the sedate youth, without moving a muscle of his countenance. "Everything is fixed. If a fire was to break out down below the news would be telegraphed up here

without delay. Then we've only got to step out of a window into a balloon, cut loose, and float away. The proprietors of this hotel look out for the safety of their guests, sir."

"So it seems. So it seems. How much, now, do they pay you a week for lying?"

This question was asked in such a peculiar tone that the youth felt disconcerted for a moment. He then burst out into a laugh.

"Excuse me, judge. What did you say was the number of your room?"

"How do you know I'm a judge?" and the old fellow turned his harsh face on the boy with a suspicious look.

"I saw you register," answered the youth. "Judge Bluebottle, of Duluth. That's why you were put up here. We keep the upper floors for distinguished people."

The judge looked more suspicious than ever.

"Distinguished people ought to feel highly flattered," he growled. "That's not the way we do things in Duluth. See here, little one, can you pilot this caravan to 294? That's the settlement I'm bound for, if I don't leave my bones on the emigrant-trail before I get there."

"Certainly," answered the youth. "Come this way. We'll be there in a fraction of a minute."

"And just look after my trunk, will you? Here I've been an hour, and not a show of it yet. Confound the baggage-smashers! That's what brought me from my room. Look it up, young man, and I'll be in your debt for a quarter. Solid leather, iron corners, name in big letters. Can't miss it if you shut your eyes."

"Room 294, did you say?"

"That's about the heft of the figures."

"You'll find the trunk there. This way, judge."

He led the way down the long corridor, remembering his late encounter with Mike, and enjoying in prospect a possible blunder, by which the irate judge would get the wrong trunk. There might be an opening for a neat bit of sport out of this affair.

A short distance down the broad passage, and a turn into another that ran at right angles to it, soon brought them to their destination. The conductor threw open the door of the room, before which he had stopped.

"Here it is, sir. Follow up the numbers on the doors, and you can easily find it. And there sits the trunk. Is there anything more you would like to have?"

The judge rested his broad shoulders against the doorway, and bent his small, wrinkled eyes upon the speaker.

"Why the blazes couldn't I pick it out myself?" he growled. "I believe I counted figures up to 2,000, or thereaway. Couldn't find any of these small numbers. See here, young gentleman, what might be your name?"

"Ralph Ready, sir."

"Then just bear in mind, Ralph, that I owe you a quarter. Call at my office the first time you come to Duluth, and bring a receipt with you. And, see here, when the dinner-bell rings fetch round one of those balloons to my room."

He turned into the room and closed the door with a clang. The sound of the turning key was heard, followed by a rasping laugh.

"Very good, Judge Bluebottle," said Ralph to himself. "But he laughs best who laughs last. If Mike has mixed those trunks I'll owe him a quarter, and without bringing him out to Duluth for it."

He walked away, not very favorably impressed with this specimen of a Western judge.

Stepping into the elevator, he landed in a few minutes on the marble paved floor of the main hall of the hotel. It was a large, profusely-adorned room, of grand dimensions. Dozens of people stood about it, or walked briskly across its sounding floor. The sounds of busy chat and laughter filled the room.

On the right side was the clerk's desk, with its semi-circular front, and its large register, in which a group of new-come guests were recording their names.

Within the inclosure stood the handsome clerk, with his smoothly-combed hair and well-waxed mustache, and with an air as if this was only one of the smallest of hotels he owned.

This important gentleman got his eye on Ralph, and beckoned him over to the desk.

"Come inside," he said, with an air of secrecy, "and wait a minute."

Ralph entered the inclosure and seated himself to wait until the clerk was through with registering the guests.

As he sat waiting, his eyes listlessly examined these persons. From them he fell to observing two others, who had just entered, and stood aside with something of a hesitating air.

These were a young gentleman and lady, dressed in traveling costume, and dusty enough to have come from a considerable distance. They were both quite young, and the lady was very pretty. She had thrown back her veil, and rested her hand on her companion's arm, looking up into his face with a loving trust that particularly took Ralph's eyes.

The gentleman seemed very ill at ease. He gazed around him with a nervous distraction of manner. Looking at the lady's face, he gave a start, and bent to whisper in her ear. She immediately dropped her veil.

"Here's a story," Ralph thought. "Green and loving. That's part of it. And runaways; that's another part. I'll bet high there's a raging father tracking these innocents, and ready to cowhide the boy, and lock up the girl in the garret. I've read it all before."

In a minute or two more this couple had registered, and were on their way to the elevator, under the care of a waiter.

The young man seemed relieved, and hurried his lady companion from the desk, as if anxious to escape from observation as quickly as possible.

"I'm going to follow that up," Ralph decided. "Shouldn't wonder if there was some fun back of it. This green love is always rich."

He rose and read the names and room number just registered.

The clerk touched him on the shoulder, and led back out of hearing of the guests.

"I have something for you, Ralph," he said, in a mysterious tone. "I have just had a warning from the police department to be on the lookout for some Western thieves, who are supposed to be traveling this way. There's been some big job done out at Illinois, and the rascals have got off with the plunder."

Ralph sat silent, taking in this interesting information.

"I may be mistaken," continued the clerk, still more mysteriously. "But from the description I have a fancy that one of them is here now. It is hardly safe to warn the police about a man who may prove a high-toned gentleman. The Grand Central has its reputation to sustain, and we must make no mistake, on either side. You are a sharp fellow, Ralph. We'll have to put you on the watch. Make you our private detective. Do you think you can manage the job?"

"I can try," answered Ralph. "What is his number?"

"Here it is on the register. The fellow swings a big title, and we'll have to feel our way gingerly."

He led the way to the book, and laid his finger on a line. To his surprise Ralph read the name of "Judge Bluebottle, Duluth, Minnesota, Room 294."

"I have seen him already," exclaimed the amateur detective. "Had a chat with him not ten minutes ago. He was roaming around the fourth floor, growling at being put too near heaven, and swearing that he had lost his room."

"Aha!" cried the clerk. "That looks suspicious. Likely enough he may have been looking up the chances for plunder. How did his behavior strike you?"

"I thought he was a raging old idiot, who wasn't safe to run loose," rejoined Ralph.

"More and more suspicious," replied the clerk. "Depend on it, that's all put on. Watch him like a hawk, boy. If there's anything questionable we'll bring the police down on our Western gentleman."

"Did you notice this couple?" asked Ralph, laying his finger on the last names registered.

"Yes," laughed the clerk. "A pair of love-blinded young ninnies. The youth hangs on to the lady as if he had found a diamond. Couldn't trust her in the ladies' room long enough to register."

"It's a runaway, I'll bet high on that," declared Ralph. "See if the indignant parent isn't here after them before two days."

The clerk laughed, and turned to the desk, before which another guest had now appeared.

This was a middle-aged gentleman, whose manner at once attracted Ralph's attention.

He was wrapped in a coarse-grained overcoat, whose collar stood upright about his ears. He had a full, red face, though it was half concealed by his pulled-down hat, long hair, and bushy beard. There were dissatisfied wrinkles about the mouth and eyes, and a general look of haste and anxiety.

He looked intently at the register before signing. The last two names particularly appeared to take his attention. He pursed up his lips as he seemed examining the handwriting.

"Roger Sherman and lady," he muttered. "How long have these persons been here?" "About ten minutes," answered the clerk. "Do you want a room?" "Yes. Yes, of course." This was hastily given, as if it were a new idea to him. "Then write your name and address." He did so in a scrawling, scrambling fashion. "John H. Benson, Chicago," read the clerk as he had dismissed this new guest in charge of a waiter. "A queer customer that. What do you think of him, Ralph?" "Don't you twig?" asked Ralph. "That is the indignant parent. Sure as you live! Look out for fun in the Grand Central soon." The clerk laughed, and turned to greet some new-comers.

CHAPTER II.

WHAT CAME OF MIKE O'FLAHERTY'S MISTAKE.

"WILL you please excuse me, sir? But—but do you belong to the hotel?"

It was a very soft and bashful voice that thus addressed Ralph as he was making his way through an upper corridor of the hotel. He turned to see who had spoken. There before him stood the pretty young lady with her shy-faced young husband, whom he had lately seen registering.

"It is somehow that way," answered Ralph. "I'm very sure the hotel don't belong to me; so I guess I must belong to it."

"We are complete strangers here," answered the lady. "Me and my—and my husband. We haven't been married long." She blushed, while the young husband drew back with an abashed air.

"Don't I know it?" replied Ralph. "Why bless you, Mrs. Sherman, we have young married couples every day. Keep a regular line of that kind of goods. Can't fool us old hotel folks."

"Is that really so? I declare I felt so strange. We are not use to traveling, you know, and it all seemed so queer. How ever did you know my name?"

"It is on the register, Eliza," said the husband, overcoming his shyness. "Excuse me, sir. But—do you know if our trunks have come?"

"They will be sent up to your room as soon as they arrive," rejoined Ralph, suppressing a smile at the verdant greenness of the pair.

"And—and can you show us the way to the dining-room?"

"We have been traveling a long distance," replied the young wife, "and are very hungry."

"Certainly," replied Ralph. "I see how it is. But you won't mind if I give you a little bit of advice?"

There was a significant twinkle in his eyes as he spoke.

"We shall be too grateful," answered Mrs. Sherman, while her husband preserved a modest silence. "Of course we are not used to the ways of the world. And with your large experience—"

Ralph looked up quickly. Was the soft-voiced young lady poking fun at him? No, she looked as innocent as a child, and evidently regarded him as a very Methuselah.

"I ain't very old myself," he answered, "but I can see through a knot-hole. Excuse me, but—he's over there—after you, like a cow after a turnip."

He twirled his finger over his shoulder, while his right eye gave a significant wink.

"Who is over there?" cried both in surprise, and with a show of alarm.

"Oh, you know! Now, see here, young folks, you don't fool me in this little game. It's a runaway match. There's no use saying it isn't. And your hateful parents are ready to chaw up the pair of you. Now you just might as well own up to the corn."

"Oh, no, no! You are ever so much mistaken! Indeed you are!"

The young wife drew back in evident alarm. The unfledged husband half hid himself behind her.

"You can't shut up this chicken's eye. There's no use trying it on," continued Ralph, with a look of mature wisdom. "He's after you, I say. He's over there."

"He? Who can you mean? It cannot be—" "I'd just advise you to take your meals in your room, that's all, if you don't want to run foul of an indignant parent. Have you ever heard of Mr. Benson, of Chicago?"

"Oh!" A cry of alarm came from the lady. "Oh, Roger, just think of our terrible danger!" She caught her young husband by the shoulders

and pushed him hastily toward their room. "Mercy! Only to think of it! Oh, sir, won't you see that our meals are served in our room? We dare not go to the public table."

"I knew it," cried Ralph, delighted at his own shrewdness. "Your father is after you hot foot, my dear lady. He is in this house. And you've got to keep close as mice, or it's all up with you. He'll snatch you back to your doll babies, and this young gentleman will have to toddle back to school. Can't fool me, I tell you! We are used to that sort of thing here."

"Won't you help us?" pleaded the young wife, with her most appealing manner. "We are so inexperienced in the ways of the world. If you will only shelter us, and keep him from us! I will be eternally grateful."

"Certainly, certainly," answered Ralph, delighted to become the sharer of a romance. "But you are not quite as green as you let on. See here, young man. Do you calculate I didn't see through your little game? You didn't sign your right name on the register."

The young husband started back, and held up both hands in deprecation.

"Oh, sir, I declare," he protested. "But—but you are really mistaken! How could I ever—"

"Drop all that," interrupted Ralph, with a sly smile. "But, don't you mind. I am on your side. I won't sell you. I don't like the looks of this raging parent, and I am going to back you up square against him."

"Oh, how can we ever repay you?"

The blushing young wife caught his hand, and kissed it fervently.

"I won't forget you, sir," said Mr. Sherman, in his retiring manner. "If you ever come out West—"

"Oh, that's all right," answered Ralph, modestly. "It's a square game. Somehow, I like you. Just you keep close. I'll see that your supper is sent up. We are three confederates, mind you. Now shut yourself up tight, and look out sharp for John H. Benson, of Chicago. I am going to set that individual on the wrong track."

Ralph laughed gayly as he proceeded on his way, while the alarmed young couple quickly closed and locked their door, as if in a state of great terror.

"Lawsee! but ain't they a prime pair of turtle-doves?" he ejaculated. "Just out of the egg. Haven't got their feathers yet. Green—oh, green isn't any word for it. They're just sky blue. There's fun in the wind, and I'm going in for my share of it."

He went on laughing immoderately, Ralph had a sharp scent for a joke, and he fancied he saw his way clear to some jolly sport.

He had not gone very far, however, before there came a diversion to the current of his thoughts. The door of a room before him opened, and a stout individual bustled out, swearing and stamping as if half-wild with rage.

"By all the blasted blunderbusses of Break-neck Valley if I don't utterly smash the infernal idiot that done this, then sell me out for a caterwauling old tom-cat, and be done with it! If there was ever a sublimer jackass I'd like somebody to haul him up here till I kick some sense into his stupid hide!"

Ralph looked up, and burst into an involuntary roar of laughter.

He had some difficulty in recognizing the individual before him. It was Judge Bluebottle, but it was the honorable judge in an extraordinary disguise.

He seemed to have been transformed into a queer sort of dude. He wore a pair of checkered pantaloons, of very loud pattern, and so very tight, that it looked as if he must have been melted and poured into them. His coat skirts came just below his waist, the sleeves were two inches too short, and it would have taken a ten-horse engine to button the flaps in front. On his head was a silk hat, very tall, and very slim. It sat on his crown like a thimble on a gate-post, while his hair stood wildly out all around its brim. Altogether he seemed to have got himself up as a comical character for a fancy dress ball.

He caught sight of Ralph and rushed angrily toward him.

"Jest look here!" he shouted furiously. "Look at me, and then go sell your blasted old hotel. Ain't I a spectacle, now? Don't you dare, on your life, to say I ain't a spectacle!"

"I think you might almost pass for a pair of spectacles," acknowledged Ralph, with renewed laughter.

"Don't you laugh at me, you snipe! Choke that down instant, or I'll burst your knowledge-box! I'm not here to be laughed at. I'm

Judge Bluebottle, of Duluth, I'd have you know. Look at me. Isn't this a sweet specimen of a dinner rig?"

He turned round on his heel, to give Ralph a chance to inspect him.

"What do you think of that now?" He gave the hat an angry jam on his head. "What do you think of that?"

"If I were you I would discharge my tailor," answered Ralph.

"My tailor? Why, hang your stupidity, do you suppose them clothes were made for me? Where's my trunk? That is what I demand to know. I demand it, sir, and I'll make things lively for this hotel if it don't turn up. There's my name on it. Bluebottle. In letters as big as a cow's horn. And what do you bring me? What but the trunk of some confounded dude? And this is all the change of rig I have for dinner."

He turned round on his heel again, holding out the scanty skirts of the coat, while a look of supreme scorn filled his important countenance.

"Inspect it, sir! Investigate it! And then go sell your moldy hotel to somebody who knows how to run it. Don't I look like a respectable father of a family now? Wouldn't I cut a sweet figure on the judge's bench?"

Ralph had hard work to repress his laughter and put on a look of proper compassion for the irate judge. Ere he could answer the last question there came another sudden diversion.

The door of a room further up the passage burst open as suddenly as the judge's had done, and another strange figure burst out into the corridor.

It was the red, wrinkled face of Mr. Benson, of Chicago, but his costume was even more surprising than that of Judge Bluebottle. He had got his arms into something not unlike a gentleman's sack coat in shape, but with a suspicious red bow at the throat, and as thickly covered with pearl buttons as if they had been sprinkled over it from a pepper-box. Beneath this coat, which was five sizes too small for his portly figure, he wore something white, which was significantly frilled and ruffled. On his head was a queer-shaped straw hat, with a bunch of blackberries on one side and a sunflower on the other.

"Lord bless you!" he ejaculated. "Look at that! There's a get-up for a gentleman and a Christian! Where's my trunk, will anybody tell me that? You sent me a trunk. Oh, yes, you kindly sent me a trunk. And that's the sort of drygoods I found in it."

Ralph could contain himself no longer. He laughed more uproariously than he had at the irate judge, at this second apparition. Even the disgusted Bluebottle could not help joining in with a broad grin at his companion in misfortune.

"You'll laugh, will you?" roared Mr. Benson. "Bless your eyes, if I'd put on all the queer rigging there was in that trunk: you might have seen a figure worth laughing at! The furbelows and the overskirts! You never saw such an odd gear. The Lord knows where they put it all! But I'm going to make this hotel sweat. They've confiscated my trunk and I won't stand it."

"Oh, that will be all right," assumed Ralph. "So many trunks coming, you know. They can't help getting mixed up. We'll have them straightened out in two or three days."

"Two or three days! Am I to go around like a mermaid, half woman and half fish, for two or three days? I demand my trunk instant!"

He stopped. His eyes had just caught the extraordinary figure of Judge Bluebottle, who was surveying him with a broad grin on his expansive face.

Mr. Benson broke involuntarily into a return laugh. For several minutes the disguised men stood shaking their sides with merriment, as they surveyed each other, while Ralph leaned against the wall in a paroxysm of laughter. He could hardly keep from rolling on the floor in enjoyment of the ridiculous scene before him.

"Oh, mercy! If I could only get them downstairs! It would be just killing! It's a shame to waste all this fun."

Suddenly Benson stopped his laughter, while a look of surprised recognition came upon his face.

"It can't be! Yes it is! Judge Bluebottle, as I live! Why, hallo! Bluebottle, old boy, give us your hand! Who'd ever expected to see you here?"

"Somehow you've got the advantage of me," said the judge, yielding his hand doubtfully to the warm grasp of the other.

"Why, I'm Benson. Benson, of Chicago. Don't you know me?"

"No. I'll be hanged if I do!"

"That's the way with you politicians. And I helped to send you to the Legislature. And that's all the thanks I get for it."

"You must excuse me, Mr. Benson," apologized the judge. "There were so many of them. And I've got such a treacherous memory. Glad to see you. On my soul I am."

"That's all right. I accept the apology. You're a gentleman, every inch, judge," Mr. Benson kept on shaking his hand. "But this is a rum go. What are we to do about our trunks?"

"Complain at the clerk's office," suggested Ralph. "That's the only way to settle it. It's a confounded shame. Come with me. I'll pilot you down. Just you give that clerk to know that you mean business."

He hurried them rapidly along the hall to where the elevator yawned, without giving them a moment's time to think. The car stood waiting for passengers. Ralph pushed them in, though they resisted a little.

"But," protested the judge, "look at us. Will there be anybody there?"

"Oh! nobody of any account," answered the sly rogue.

It was too late for further remonstrance. The door was closed. The car was rapidly descending. In a minute it reached the main floor, and the door flew open.

"Come," said Ralph, hurrying his victims out into the hall.

They paused in dismay. The room was thronged with people. One look was enough. There burst out a roar of laughter that shook the very roof of the hotel.

Peal after peal came from the assembled crowd, while the two odd figures stood, shoulder to shoulder, in sheepish amazement before them.

Men laughed until the tears ran down their cheeks. The effort to look dignified in the two victims was as ludicrous as their attire. People rushed from every side to see the source of the fun.

"Blame your dirty young picture, this is all your doings!" cried the irate judge, shaking his fist at Ralph. "Burst my sides, if I don't get even with you for it! Back up-stairs with this thundering concern, boy, quick as greased lightning, before that crowd of jackasses split themselves into kindling wood."

He rushed back into the elevator, followed by Benson, and by renewed peals of laughter.

"I owe you a quarter, judge. Don't forget," cried Ralph, as the sliding-door sharply closed.

"Come to my office in Duluth, and bring a receipt, and I will hand over the cash."

CHAPTER III.

STRAIGHTENING OUT MIKE'S BLUNDER.

"SEE here, Mike. There's the very Old Nick to pay up-stairs, and all through your blundering. You've gone and mixed up the trunks the worst way. And now there's hoary old rogues parading around in women's fixings; and the next thing we will have some young lady marching down to dinner in a pair of Chicago breeches. Lawsez, won't you catch it!"

"Be jabers, and it's a whoppin' big loi. I've done nothin' o' the kind, at all, at all," exclaimed Mike, in a rage. "It's much too fond of your jokes you are, Mr. Ralph. Ye're allers gettin' up some swate story o' the kind, widout an ounce o' truth in it. Faix ye'll be afther tellin' me next I don't know the differ betwixt 294 and 249; as you was hintin' at this blessed mornin'."

"That's all very fine, Mike," answered Ralph. "But if you know which side your bread's buttered you'll emigrate to Canada, and set up a shebang in the woods. There's a couple of wild Westerners rampaging for you up-stairs, like bulls in a clover field."

"To Canady, is it? And me an O'Flaherty, of the ould blood? Indade, thin, an not a step will I stir. It's moighty little meself cares for your Westerners. And you naden't be pokin' your fun at me. Shure there's not a man in the hotel can bate me at trunk deliverin', as is well known."

"All right, Mike," laughed his youthful tormentor. "But bless us, won't you be sliced and pickled! There's the clerk calling for you now. Walk up to the counter and get your rations."

"Mike! Mike O'Flaherty!" came in commanding tones from across the hall.

"Ay, ay!" answered the irate porter. "I'm comin'. Jist go sell yerself, Mr. Ralph. I didn't

cross the salt says to be made sport of by no blatherin' Yankee. And that's ivery word the truth."

Mike lumbered away to the clerk's desk, followed at a distance by the laughing youth, who was bound to see the fun out.

At the desk stood two men, Judge Bluebottle and Mr. Benson. They had got back to their traveling-suits, and were raising Cain about their trunks.

"Hang it, sir, the trunk looked like mine," cried the judge, "and my key opened it. But bless your blue eyes if you'd only seen the stuff that was inside! I'd give a solid quarter to see the chap that was to wear them, shoot me if I wouldn't! He must be a cross between a dandy and a baboon."

"I had the same luck as the judge," broke in Mr. Benson. "Only I found a trunk full of women's fixings. The queerest-looking concerns. Where they put them all gets me. You never saw such twistified bits of dry-goods."

"I am very sorry, gentlemen," answered the suave clerk, twirling his mustache with an easy air. "Mistakes will happen, you know. But we'll make that all right in a jiffy. See here, Mike. What confounded blundering have you been at now?"

"Sorrah the bit of a blunder," replied Mike, sturdily. "Excuse me, Mither Jones, if that sames a short answer. But I've got me character to sustain, and well you know the loike o' me you haven't got in the hotel."

"That's true, Mike," assented the clerk, with a faint smile. "It would be hard to find your like at getting a straight thing crooked. You've made a ridiculous mess with these gentlemen's trunks, and if you don't straighten it out within ten minutes I'll dock you a week's wages."

"Shure, Mither Jones—" began Mike.

"There. That will do! I don't want an hour's blather. Off with you now."

"Off wid me, is it? And where to, will ye please say? I know no more where the gentlemen's trunks is nor the man in the moon." Mike stood scratching his head in stupid perplexity.

Ralph stepped forth at this juncture from the pillar against which he had been leaning.

"Maybe I can straighten up this affair. Who is in 249, Mr. Jones?"

"A pair of newly married goslin's," answered Mr. Jones, looking at the register. "Roger Sherman and lady. You recollect them. Green as meadow-grass. Here they are, registered between these two gentlemen."

"They've got the missing trunks. I told Mike he was making a blunder. They asked me an hour ago for their trunks. There were only two left in the baggage-room and I sent them up."

"That's how it is," declared the clerk, as easily as if blunders were part of the regular course of life. "Off with you, Mike. Get those trunks from 249 and take them to 260 and 294. And take care you don't mix them again."

"Faix an' I'm no prophet," rejoined Mike. "Will you please tell me how I'm to know the which one from the t'other?"

"Can you read?" asked the judge.

"Can I rade? And me from ould Ireland? Maybe ye don't know that we drown iverybody there that can't rade, for the honor of the country."

"You do eh? Then I've seen some that swam ashore, that's all. You'll find 'Bluebottle' on my trunk and you won't want any spy-glass to see it."

"Here are the keys of these gentlemen's rooms, Mike," said the clerk. "Off with you now, and let me hear of no more blunders."

Mike shot away, rather glad to escape so easily.

The two guests stood by the desk talking and questioning the clerk and Ralph.

"A pretty little spark of a city you have here," remarked the judge. "Near as lively as Duluth. And brimful of rogues, I calculate."

"I fancy we could gather up a hatful without shaking the tree," answered the clerk.

"I will have to go out and take a look at it," announced the judge. "Hope I won't get lost. Lend me a piece of chalk so I can blaze my way."

"I will show you around if you wish," remarked Ralph, modestly.

"You will, will you?" cried the judge, sarcastically. "You'll show me around, eh? I'm ever so much obliged, I am sure. But you've shown me around once already, and I fancy that will do. I haven't for my young sprout. I owe you one, and I've got a rod in pickle for you."

Ralph slipped back behind the irate judge to indulge in a quiet laugh.

"Oh, come, judge. Boys will be boys, you know," broke in the clerk. "You liked a bit of fun yourself in your young days, I'll be bound."

"You bet I did!" cried the judge, heartily. "We will have to let up on the boy, I guess. But if he tries another game on me, shoot me for a jack-rabbit if I don't yank him out the window. What time do you sling out supper in this here caravansary?"

"Any time after six."

"Then look for me on hand. And just cook me a buffalo whole, will you? And hunt me up a sapling for a tooth-pick. I'm from the far North, gentlemen; and I've come here to eat out my hotel bill."

He turned away with a free swing, as if he felt he had done his full duty by Duluth.

"One moment, judge," called Mr. Benson. "I've been around this city a trifle; if you don't object to company, I wouldn't mind a walk round with you."

"Certainly—of course," cried the judge, heartily. "You're Benson, of Chicago, I think you said. Hang me, if I remember you! But you know me—that's enough. I flatter myself I'm well-known out West, if they haven't got my photograph in these diggings. Come ahead, Benson. You're a brick."

The solid figure of the judge rolled away, followed by his Chicago acquaintance.

Mr. Jones looked at Ralph, with a smile of amusement on his very correct face. Ralph broke into a laugh.

"What do you think?" asked the clerk, with a significant wink. "He's either very shallow, or very deep—I can't make out which. Have you seen anything suspicious?"

"Nothing, except a fancy for prowling around."

"That's doubtful—very doubtful. And this bluff way may be all put on. I bet he rings in that fellow Benson. Best keep an eye on them, Ralph. See where they go, and what they're up to."

"I will," answered Ralph, darting to the door of the hotel, in order to put himself on the track of the two guests.

They were still in full view, and in a moment he was on their trail.

About the same instant, Mike O'Flaherty was knocking at the door of room No. 249. A sort of fluttering sound came from inside in answer to his knock, but the door remained closed.

He knocked again, after waiting for a minute.

"Faix, I should have axed fur the kay. Maybe they're out."

He waited for some seconds longer, and was about to repeat his summons, when the door opened a crack, and Mr. Sherman made his appearance.

He was without his coat, and was rubbing his eyes, and yawning, as if just awakened from a sleep.

"Pray, excuse me; I was asleep," he apologized, in his abashed manner. "Did you knock?"

"I battered me knuckles a bit, anyway," rejoined Mike.

"And what can I do for you?"

"There's some thrunks here as belongs elsewhere, and some thrunks beyant as belongs here. And it's to distribute them I am."

"But we have no trunks here but our own. They were brought in just before I lay down."

"I'm doubtful if ye've examined 'em," said Mike.

"Why no. I thought of course they were all right."

"It's all wrong they are, thin. And I'm sent here to make 'em right. Let me in, and I'll fotch ye your own thrunks in a jiffy."

The conversation, so far, had been carried on through a crack. Mr. Sherman holding the door but slightly open.

"You must wait. You must really wait," he hastily declared, with a blush. "Mrs. Sherman isn't dressed for company. We'll be ready in five minutes, sir. In five minutes."

"Shure and she needn't moind me," protested Mike. "It's not company I am. But faix if the lady's young and bashful I won't intrude on her. Only please ax her to be spy about it, for ye niver seen sich a pother as the other folks is in."

The blushing young husband quickly shut and locked the door. Mike remained outside, resting his shoulders against the wall, and muttering to himself.

"Maybe whin the young crayther has lived long in a hotel she'll not be so nice about puttin' on her ribbons and laces to resave a porter."

It's 'asy to persave that's she's niver been an ould traveler."

Mrs. Sherman, however, did not seem inclined to hurry. Mike was kept waiting for more than five minutes. During this time some faint but odd sounds came from the room that held the young travelers, but Mike paid little attention to them. Just then his soul was in old Ireland, roaming over the green valley of Ballymacflanagan, and he had no ears for sublunary things.

He roused himself with a start on hearing the voice of Mr. Sherman.

"You can come in now. You must excuse my keeping you waiting. But—you know—"

"I know this," said Mike gallantly, as he looked into the pretty face of the young wife. "I know that Mrs. Sherman didn't nade the ribbons and laces as she's been puttin' on. Sich a purty bird as her don't nade fine feathers. An' ther's no compliment in a word of it."

"Oh, now, you stop your blarney," exclaimed Mrs. Sherman, with a laugh of conscious pleasure. "Here are the trunks. We've just had time to look at them. Just to think of a man with that name! Bluebottle! Take them away, for mercy's sake, and bring us our own. Bluebottle! To think of a man with such a name as that! What is he like?"

The young lady had certainly found her tongue. She rattled on as Mike pulled out the trunks.

"If ye've iver seen a big, fat bluebottle fly swelled out to the bigness of a calf ye'll know widout axin'," rejoined Mike. "He's a jolly old blade, from the West. There. Ye'll have your thrunks now, in the twinkle of a banshee's wing."

Away he trundled the trunks on his hall barrow. The husband and wife looked at each other.

"I'd like to mash that Irishman's head," cried Mr. Sherman, in tones loud enough for Mike to hear.

"What for?"

"For ogling you. I won't have you ogled and complimented."

"Mercy, Roger! Then you had best put me in a bandbox, with sealing-wax on the lid. I can't help being pretty and people of taste cannot help seeing it."

Mike heard all this as he went away. He did not see, however, the looks that passed between the young couple, or he might have guessed that they did not mean all they said.

In a few minutes he returned with the correct trunks, and deposited them in grim silence in their room.

"There's your thrunks," he said. "And now, ma'am, ye'll excuse me fur one word. If he looks up that purty face, as he talks of, just pass me the word. On the honor of an Irishman I'll have ye out, if I have to bust through iron bars. And my name it's Mike O'Flaherty."

Mike walked grandly away, with a look of sturvy defiance at the husband. He failed to see the look of amusement that passed behind his back.

CHAPTER IV.

ANOTHER RAGING PARENT TURNS UP.

In a gambling-saloon not far from the Grand Central Hotel sat two men, busily engaged in a game of poker. So deeply interested were they, indeed, that they failed to notice a young man who had stationed himself behind, and was looking over the cards held by one of the gamblers.

These gentlemen were the late guests of the Grand Central, Judge Bluebottle and Mr. Benson, and the young man who was observing their game was Ralph Ready, the amateur detective of the hotel.

"So that's what Mr. Benson calls showing the judge around?" said Ralph to himself. "Wonder if he's a regular card-sharp, and if he's playing it on old Bluebottle? Don't look like it, though. Looks like a solid pork merchant, or maybe a chap that goes in on margins. He's got the regular speculator's twitch about his eyes."

He drew a chair up behind the gamblers, who were growing deeply absorbed in their game.

"See here, Benson, where in the blazes did you get that hand?" exclaimed the judge, excitedly. "You've swept me out of a ten, in a whiff. Never mind, I'll have my revenge."

"Fortune favors the brave," replied Benson, as he dealt the cards.

He was as cool as a cucumber, while his antagonist grew more heated at every moment. They gave the impression of a practiced gambler and an excitable innocent.

At first Benson won, but after a short time the luck turned in the judge's favor, and he be-

gan to haul in the stakes. His angry excitement now became a jubilant manner.

"Aha! old boy. You thought you had me, I reckon. Didn't know we had any card-slingers out in Duluth, did you? Look out, Benson, now, I'm going to warp you."

"Chicago never backs down before Duluth," answered Benson, coolly.

"Then here's a solid ten on this hand. See it if you've got the heart."

"See it it is," retorted Benson, covering the bet.

"An ace full."

"Take it down," cried Benson, flinging up his cards.

"Waked up the wrong 'possum this time, my boy," and the judge shook his sides with a hearty laugh. "Thought you had a softy, didn't you, that you'd clean right out? It's your deal, Benson."

The judge swung round in his seat and encountered the young face of Ralph behind him. At once a look of anger came into his countenance.

"Blame your impudence!" he roared, "what are you spying around here, for? Is that what the hotel keeps you for, to spy on their guests? Now get, before I kick you into the middle of next week."

"Do you own this establishment?" asked Ralph, composedly.

"What the blazes is that your affair?"

"Only I wouldn't begin to run it before I owned it, that's all."

"Did you ever hear the like of that, Benson?" cried the judge, with a hoarse laugh. "That's the way they bring up boys nowadays. Lord, I'm half-afraid to take off my boots at night for fear some of the boys will be stepping into them. Vamose now, my young rooster! I don't want no half-feathered chicken blinking over my shoulder."

"All right, judge," returned Ralph, rising with an easy air. "Peaches ripen early here-aways; and boys are as smart as your men out West. Do you want me to tell Mr. Benson the reason you don't like a looker-on?"

"I want you to mind your own business, and be hanged to you!" roared the angry judge. "Slide now, while your skin's warm."

"When are you going to pay me that quarter, judge?" asked Ralph, with a tantalizing air.

"I've a notion that quarter is about square," remarked Mr. Benson, with a sly smile. "Let's find another table, judge, if this youngster wants this."

"Nary time," answered Ralph, rising and walking away, with a gay whistle.

The gamblers turned again to their work, the judge still growling about "the infernal impertinence of boys nowadays," while Benson preserved his coolness of demeanor.

"What did he want to tell me, judge?" asked the latter.

"Oh, some of his babyish fancies," was the hasty and nervous reply. "Don't ask me for all the nonsense that goes through a boy's noddle. Deal the cards, Benson, and don't addle your brains about the young sprout."

A faint smile came to Benson's lips as he obeyed. He evidently "smelt a rat."

Ralph walked whistling away with his hands in his pockets. After looking around the room, in which there were other guests of the Grand Central, he left the establishment, and made his way back to the hotel.

"What luck?" asked Mr. Jones, on perceiving his deputy. "Anything in the wind?"

"A gudgeon piloting a shark," answered Ralph, with a knowing wink. "Benson led straight to Larry's card den. I caught them in a game of poker. And, bless you, you should have seen the neat way in which the judge put up the cards! He's a sharp, from the word go. I bet he picks the Chicago greeny as clean as a dry chicken-bone."

"Didn't I say so?" exclaimed the clerk.

"Keep an eye on him, Ralph. He's our man."

"He plays the bluff as neat as wax-works. Just rants and roars like a big bull calf; and all the time he's handling the deck like a Mississippi gambler."

"Look out he don't play the same game on the hotel. That's what he's here for."

"He can't stack that hand on me," replied Ralph confidently. "I'll watch him like a hawk after a bluebird. Bet you high I checkmate his little game."

The youthful detective walked away with an air of shrewdness. He had full confidence in his own ability, and he only wanted a chance to repay the judge for his late contumely.

Ralph took the elevator and went up to the upper floors of the hotel. It was part of his

duty to keep an eye upon the halls and corridors while the guests were at meals.

He had not gone far before he came upon the young runaway wife, Mrs. Sherman, who was moving along in rather a suspicious manner, at some distance from her room.

On seeing Ralph her face put on an expression of innocent relief.

"Oh, dear sir!" she exclaimed, laying her hands on his arm beseechingly. "I am ever so glad to meet you. I was down to the parlor, and was dreadfully afraid of meeting my—of meeting Mr. Benson. "She hastily corrected herself. "Will you not kindly go ahead, and warn me of danger? Oh, if I can only get back to my room without his seeing me!"

"You needn't be afraid," said Ralph in a tone of assurance. "Your father is not in the establishment."

"My father! Why, I never said he was my father! What ever gave you that fancy?" She burst into a peal of ringing but somewhat strained laughter.

"It won't do, Mrs. Sherman," answered Ralph with a sly look. "We hotel folks, you know, get our eye teeth cut early. Don't I know that you're a precious pair of runaway turtle-doves, and that your daddy is after you?"

"Oh, dear me, what a fancy!" and she again laughed merrily. "Why, we are an old married couple!"

"How old?" asked Ralph, looking knowingly into her eyes.

"You cunning dog!" She tapped him playfully on the arm. "I really thought we could fool you."

"Not so easy," laughed Ralph.

"I know how it is. It is Roger. He is so dreadfully shy. I tell him he is just letting everybody know. But it's no use. But, won't you be my friend, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Ready," suggested Ralph.

"Mr. Ready, I do so need a friend! Roger is so backward. But you know all the ways of the hotel. You can keep my—Mr. Benson, I mean, away from me."

"All right," laughed Ralph. "It is a bargain. I'm a regular angel in a romance, Mrs. Sherman. Just leave it all to me."

"Do you think it safe for us to go down to the supper-table, while he is out? I am so hungry. And I know the waiter won't bring me half enough to eat, if he brings up my supper."

"It is perfectly safe," answered Ralph. "Mr. Benson is in good hands. He won't be back these two hours."

Ralph began to see plenty of fun ahead. He piloted the young couple to the elevator. Mr. Sherman seemed more shy than ever, and startled nervously at the least sound.

"Don't be scared," Ralph remarked. "Nobody is going to eat you alive."

"I am not used to traveling," acknowledged the bashful spouse. "And—and besides—"

"Oh, put on a stiff upper lip. Folks will be looking at you. This is the way to the supper-room."

Ralph stationed them at a retired table, called a waiter, and then fixed himself at a distant table to eat his own supper, while keeping an eye on the amusing pair.

They were certainly hungry, as Mrs. Sherman had declared, if one could judge by the havoc they made in the provisions. The pretty young wife, who looked as if she had been just weaned on rose leaves, made a frightful assault on beefsteak, while her bashful spouse did not seem a bit shy in the presence of a veal cutlet.

Ralph continued to watch them, a quiet smile upon his face, as he deliberately made his own supper.

"That's what one might call a wild Western appetite," he thought. "That delicate little angel makes no more of a boiled potato than I would of a chestnut. And her sweet-faced boy husband has got the appetite of a hippopotamus. They'll make a famine, sure, if they keep on."

His eyes were fixed on Mr. Sherman, who had just raised a morsel of cutlet to his lips. He let it suddenly drop, while a pallor came upon his face. In an instant he had caught up his napkin and was wiping his mouth in such a way as to half conceal his face.

Ralph followed the direction of Mr. Sherman's eyes. They seemed fixed upon a person who had just entered the room—a tall, thin-faced, beardless personage, with a peculiar set in his lips, and a keen look in his gray eyes.

He stood beside a table, and moved his eyes sharply around the room before taking his seat. Mr. Sherman continued to hold the napkin to his face, while he said something in a low tone to his wife.

"Another spoke in the wheel," Ralph said to

himself. "Wonder if this is the boy's daddy? Looks like it the way the young rogue quails. I must slip them up-stairs quietly. I've given my word, and am in for it."

The stranger had now seated himself and was giving his order, but his eyes continued their watchful glances. Ralph got up and strolled over to the young couple.

"I've seen it all," he said. "It's your paternal ancestor this time, Mr. Sherman. There's no use denying. I can see through it. If he gets his eye on you, mercy, won't there be a kick up! Come, I fancy I can cover your retreat."

He stationed himself so as to conceal the two young guests. They rose hastily, partly hiding their faces with their handkerchiefs. Sheltered by Ralph they managed to slip unseen from the room.

A few minutes sufficed them to reach their apartment. Ralph was turning away, with a strict injunction to them to keep mum. But the pair rushed forward, Mr. Sherman seizing one hand and shaking it fervently, while Mrs. Sherman caught and kissed the other.

"How can we ever repay you?"

"Oh, that's nothing," protested Ralph, breaking away. "Just wait till it's all through, and see if I don't circumvent the raging parents."

He hurried briskly away, failing to perceive the peculiar smile that passed between husband and wife. Were they secretly making merry at his expense?

A half-hour afterward he noticed the newcomer closely investigating the hotel register and questioning the clerk.

"I knew it," said Ralph, triumphantly. "It's the boy's daddy, or I don't know peas from persimmons!"

CHAPTER V.

A MYSTERY AT THE GRAND CENTRAL.

RALPH READY sat in the clerk's office, with his eyes fixed upon a note-book which he held in his hand. He read its contents carefully, occasionally making a fresh note.

Mr. Jones turned to him, after getting rid of some inquisitive guests, of that sort who think a hotel clerk is born with a knowledge of everything.

"It's a wonder they don't ask me next how many square inches goes to an acre in the moon," he declared, in a vexed tone. "If they'd use their own brains a little they might give mine a rest. How goes it, Ralph? Are you seeing through your milestone?"

"I don't know just what to make of old Bluebottle," answered Ralph, shaking his head doubtfully. "He's a cross between a blustering church deacon and a full-blown rogue."

"He looks honest enough, but actions speak louder than looks. Have you noticed anything suspicious?"

"Yes," replied Ralph, referring to his note-book. "It's all down here."

"Item: I find him roaming around the upper halls, like a stray goose in a clover field. Spying for snacks. Let on he was lost; but that's all in my eye."

"Item: He plays the innocent on Benson, works him into a game of poker, and stacks the cards on him shamefully. Never saw more barefaced robbery."

"Cheated, did he?" asked the clerk.

"Cheated isn't no word for it. He plucked Benson; that's the truth."

"A doubtful character and a practiced gambler," considered the clerk. "Anything else, Ralph?"

Ralph referred again to his note-book.

"Item: Caught him coming out of the room of one of our guests. This time he was hunting for Benson's room. Said that Benson had cleaned him out, and he wanted to have his revenge. Got into that room by mistake. Found the door unlocked."

"That's too thin," said the clerk. "Watch him close, Ralph. He is after no good. It is odd that people will not keep their doors locked. But there are always some careless fools. If we hear of any robbery Bluebottle's our game."

He gave Ralph a significant wink, who answered it by another.

"I calculate we know a thing or two," said the youthful detective. "Your Western sharps are digging in the wrong field. I'm only a boy, Mr. Jones; but I don't fancy old Bluebottle can sell me cheap."

"Do you see the tall, sharp-faced fellow over there by the paper stand?" asked the clerk, pointing to the man meant.

Ralph looked. It was the same man who had given the runaway couple the start in the supper-room.

"He is on a scout of some kind," continued

Mr. Jones. "Investigated the register, and asked me all sorts of questions about our guests. He is tracking some parties, I know. But he was so rascally sly that I got on my mettle, and gave him no satisfaction. Folks that want to know everything and tell nothing, don't always win their game."

"I know what he is after."

"You do, eh?" exclaimed Mr. Jones, in surprise. "What is it, then? Hang me if I could guess."

"You know our pair of runaway goslin's?"

"Yes."

"Well, this is the boy's daddy. Benson of Chicago is the girl's daddy. Why, they're scared half out of their skins. They've froze onto me as their best friend."

"By Jupiter, Ralph, I believe you're right," exclaimed Mr. Jones, energetically. "It was a young couple he was spying after. But he was so confounded sly that I threw him off the track. What's to be done? Shall we pass them over to their daddies?"

"Nary time," cried Ralph. "They're married, and that can't be undone. I've passed my word to screen them from their raging daddies, and I'm going to do it. It's a neat bit of sport, Mr. Jones, and that just suits me. And besides, they're so sweetly tender and bashful and idiotic. A nice pair of babes in the woods. It would be a royal shame to go back on them."

"Look out they don't stack the cards on you, as the judge did on Benson. They might be a pair of Western sharps."

"Do you see anything green there?" responded Ralph, touching his eye.

"All right, my boy. But smartness is one thing and experience is another."

"Just you trust me for that. I might be sold by a goose, but I can't be by a gosling."

This conversation was suddenly interrupted. Judge Bluebottle had just leaped from the elevator with a flaming face, and eyes flashing fury. He ran fiercely across to the clerk's desk, shouldering everybody in his way rudely aside. His hat was flung back on his forehead, and his long hair stood out around, like a loose fringe.

"By the rantankerous Rocky Mountain goat!" he shouted, "if this isn't thinner than skim-milk, then sell me for a played-out old jackass! I've been robbed, sir! Robbed! Some of your hotel thieves have gone through my trunk, I tell you! Five hundred in hard cash, and a package of papers that are worth thousands! Thousands, sir! Do you hear me? I've been robbed! And if the stuff don't come back quicker than lightning I'll make this hotel howl! Take that down, sir! I'll make it howl worse than a speckled rooster with the gripes!"

Mr. Jones looked at him in surprise. He was fairly foaming with rage. It did not look like a trick.

"Will you please simmer down, Mr. Bluebottle?" advised the clerk in his cool manner. "I am not a bit hard of hearing. Just come down to quiet logic, and let me know what has happened?"

"Quiet logic! It's mighty nice talking! Do you think my blood's all buttermilk?" The irate Westerner fairly danced in his excitement. "I've been robbed, I say! Do you hear that?"

"We have a safe here for valuables," answered the clerk coldly. "If guests choose to keep their money in their rooms the hotel is not responsible. You will find the rules of the hotel on your room door."

"Hang it, sir, my trunk was gone through before I got it! Your blundering porter stuck it in somebody else's room, and they went through it."

"Was it locked when you got it?"

"Yes."

"Then how do you know they opened it? It was in the room of a young married couple, who are not the kind that indulge in trunk-robbing. It was not there an hour, and when the porter went after it he found them both asleep. They didn't know that they had the wrong trunks till he told them. Sounds likely, don't it? How do we know but your trunk was robbed on the train? Or maybe you forgot to put your money in it?"

"Likely I did!" roared the judge. "I look like that kind, don't I? You'll tell me next that I've forgot my ears. Here's Benson. He's been robbed, too. Ask him if he dropped his cash in a rat-hole instead of in his trunk."

Mr. Benson had been standing behind the judge during this tirade, with an anxious face, but not able to get a word in edgeways. He now stepped forward.

"I am not sure," he replied doubtfully. "I had a hundred in greenbacks in my trunk, and there are only fifty there now."

"How much did the judge win at that little game of poker?" asked Ralph innocently, from his corner.

"Win? Blazes! He cleaned me out," cried the judge. "Went through me like a rat through a biscuit."

"I thought you were holding the winning hands," remark Ralph slyly.

"Luck turned. Luck turned," was the hasty reply. "Confound the cards, they always kick up their heels at me. But what's that got to do with the robbery?"

"Maybe you've been having some other little games, and that's what has gone with your money."

"Hang your impudent young picture, do you want me to flatten your prying proboscis?" The furious Westerner seemed on the point of springing over the barrier, and punishing the inquisitive youth.

"Come, come, Bluebottle," said Mr. Benson soothingly, catching him by the sleeve. "There is no use talking here. Let us go lay our complaint before the authorities. That's the place to get justice."

"Blast me if your head isn't level, Benson!" roared the judge. "Come ahead, old chap. You bet I'm not going to stand this. I'll have my money, or I'll mortgage this hotel. I'm no slouch, nary time."

He followed Mr. Benson, still muttering threats of revenge.

As may be imagined, this explosion had made a marked sensation in the main hall of the hotel. A considerable number of persons were present, guests and visitors, and they crowded curiously around the angry judge. Some followed him and his companion from the hotel; others pushed up to question the clerk. Some, with anxious faces, made for the stairs and the elevator. These were probably guests who had left valuables in their room, and who had grown nervous on hearing the judge's startling assertion.

"I know nothing whatever about it," Mr. Jones testily answered his questioners. "The trunks got mixed, and were for an hour in the room of a young married couple. But they were all right when they left there, and I don't believe a word of this cock-and-bull story. The man has not been robbed in this hotel."

"A young married couple, did you say?" asked the sharp-faced guest whom Ralph had conjectured to be the bridegroom's father. "What sort of looking people are these?"

"Genuine country folks," answered the clerk. "The lady has red hair, and the youth a carrot nose, and dressed like a guy. Do you know them, sir?"

"No," answered the other. "They are strangers to me."

He turned away with an air of disappointment.

Mr. Jones winked at Ralph, as much as to say, "I didn't pump worth a cent. The cat's in the bag yet."

Silence and calm fell upon the hotel after this exciting episode. Mr. Jones leaned his arms on his desk, and looked vacantly off into space. Ralph made a new entry in his note book. The sharp stranger stood leaning against a pillar, following with his eyes every person that passed through the hall. There was something very keen in his gaze.

But this calm was only the pause before the storm. Clouds were gathering, that would soon break out in new thunders.

Down came the elevator, and landed a dozen of excited individuals, gentlemen and ladies, some of them pale, some very red in the face. They were the guests who had hurried upstairs on hearing of the robbery.

In a moment, a redoubled confusion followed the reign of calm. They hurried across to the clerk's desk, each in eager excitement.

"It is true! We have been robbed. The hotel has been robbed!" they cried, in wild anxiety. "Our rooms have been entered—we have been robbed!"

"What is that?" cried the clerk, now thoroughly aroused. "Robbed! Who says he has been robbed?"

"I do," sturdily answered a stout Englishman. "I do. I've lost a dozen handkerchiefs and a bottle of brandy; and I'll have it back, sirrah, I'll have it back."

"I have lost a pair of diamond earrings," broke in a showily-dressed lady. "Valuable solitaire brilliants. And I know my room door was locked."

"It is a confounded pity that a man can't be safe in his own rooms," exclaimed a highly-dressed young gentleman. "I laid my purse on the bureau not an hour ago. Forgot it, in fact."

It is not there now. What do you think of that, sir?"

"How much money was in it?"

"More than three hundred dollars."

The clerk made an effort to reply, but his voice was drowned in those of the other guests, who eagerly recounted their various losses. According to them the thieves had made a rich haul.

"I am sorry to hear all this, ladies and gentlemen," remarked the clerk, as soon as he could get an opportunity to speak. "It is your own carelessness, I must say. The hotel accepts no responsibility for money or jewels left in the rooms of guests. We provide a place for the safe-keeping of valuables. But, of course, the proprietors of the Grand Central cannot rest under this imputation. This robbery shall be looked strictly into. I will send for detectives at once and have every suspicious party examined."

As he spoke Judge Bluebottle and Mr. Benson re-entered the hotel, accompanied by a party who looked like a detective. They were instantly surrounded by the other victims, who eagerly recounted their losses to the judge.

"What do you think, Ralph? Is old Duluth our game?" asked Mr. Jones, turning to his subordinate.

But Ralph had gone. He had vanished several minutes before.

CHAPTER VI.

RALPH LEADS A SCOUTING PARTY.

THAT there was a high state of excitement in the Grand Central need not be told. The charge of robbery had fallen like a bombshell in the midst of the guests. Nothing of the kind had ever been known there before. The hotel had led a very quiet, respectable life, and for its calm existence to be broken in this way seemed dreadful to contemplate.

The proprietors were quickly notified on the circumstance, and were severely indignant at the base idea.

"I cannot believe it," cried one of them, angrily. "Nothing of the kind was ever heard of here. These good folks are dreaming. It is a sort of epidemic; a kind of catching disease."

"Then you think that a charge of robbery is like cholera or the small-pox?" asked a guest, sarcastically. "See here, Mr. Mulford, I'm a few steps short of being a fool. I know that I left a valuable ring lying on my bureau, and I know it is gone. Maybe you will say that is all fancy. I am ready to swear that it is all fact."

Mr. Jones drew his employer aside, and engaged him in an eager, whispered conversation.

"There is no doubt of it," he declared. "There has been a robbery committed. It is our duty to order an investigation at once. It will not do for it to be said that we shirked inquiry."

"Certainly not! Of course not! The thing must be looked into immediately. But I am in a quandary, Jones. Our people are honest. They have all been tried. Who has done this robbery?"

"That is what we want to find out," smiled Mr. Jones. "Officers are on hand now. We must leave it to them to investigate."

In addition to the detective brought by Judge Bluebottle, there was another present, who had been sent for by the clerk. These men had been for some minutes busily engaged in questioning the victimized guests. While they did so, the quiet, sharp-faced man, of whom we have already spoken, and who had registered himself as John Ransome, of Toledo, stood leaning indolently against a pillar, his keen eyes fixed on the faces of the various parties interested.

While this was going on down-stairs some events of importance were taking place in the upper region of the hotel. Ralph, with the instinct of a detective, had proceeded thither immediately on hearing of the robbery, with the intention of examining the indications. Something of importance might be visible now, which would disappear if not at once looked into.

That the blustering old judge was the thief, he felt sure, the more so as he had examined the register, and found that the room from which he had seen him emerging was that of one of the victims of the robbery.

"There is no mistake about it," Ralph considered. "Old Duluth is our game. A precious rascal he is, too. Robbed himself, eh? That's an old trick. I bet he finds that he is playing it on the wrong customers this time. How he roars and rants. It is a very shrewd

game, and might work if played on green country-hotel folks. But I don't fancy it will go down in the Grand Central."

This conjecture of Ralph was certainly a very reasonable one. It was the same as was adopted by the detectives down-stairs, when Mr. Jones took them aside, and explained his suspicions.

In fact it seemed evident on the face of it. It appeared so plain to Ralph that he thought it, on the whole, rather stupid.

"A keen thief would have covered his tracks up better," he told himself.

And yet it does not always do to accept what seems evident on the face of it. In this world of tricks and wiles the clear side is not always the true side, as the young detective was likely to find out before he was much older.

His investigations were interrupted, ere they had made much progress, by the appearance of Mrs. Sherman, who wore on her pretty face a look of eager determination.

"Excuse me, Mr. Ready," she cried. "You have been so kind that I hardly dare venture to ask any more favors of you. But—but we are all young folks together, you know. Roger and I have been very hasty and foolish. But what could we do?" She shrugged her pretty shoulders helplessly. "We were so much in love. You ought to appreciate our position, for you will be doing the same thing yourself next."

"I will?" exclaimed Ralph. "Well, I guess not. Not if the court knows herself."

"Don't tell me," she petulantly replied. "A spry young fellow like you. And you are not much younger than Roger. And ever so much older than me. You would not imagine what a mere baby I am."

"You have lived long enough to know a thing or two," he answered, looking critically in her face. There were lines there that told that the young lady was quite old enough to take care of herself.

"You are a cunning rogue," she declared, tapping his arm knowingly with her fan. "I have to be wide-awake, Mr. Ready, that is a fact. Roger is such a child. He is no more fit to deal with the world than a caterpillar."

"I fancy so. The young gentleman is shy, that's certain," answered Ralph laughingly. "But you have wit enough for the pair, Mrs. Sherman."

"I don't know," she replied, a look of helpless trouble coming upon her young face. "I am just appalled when I think of all that's before us. I do sometimes wish that I was only home again with my dear mother. A runaway match is very sweet and romantic, of course, but it's dreadful sometimes. What will ever become of us if our fathers overtake us, Mr. Ready? They are both so angry and violent, I know. I tremble at the very thought of it."

"They look mild enough."

"They? Who do you mean? Oh, you mean that notion of yours that they are here now. Whatever gave you such an idea?"

"You do not say that it is not a true one," remarked Ralph, with a sly look into her innocent blue eyes.

"Oh, nonsense! You're too sharp. But, Mr. Ready, do you know that we are perfect prisoners here? Afraid to move a step for fear we will be seen? And I can't bear the idea. It makes me just wild to get out. Can't you slip us out of the hotel somehow without—without anybody seeing us? I must have a race around the city, or I'll do something desperate, I know I will."

Ralph considered a moment, while her bright eyes eagerly read his face.

"It can be done easily enough, Mrs. Sherman. There is the back stairway. If we only meet nobody that knows you in the passages."

"You are ever so kind," she impulsively cried. "Just go and see that the way is clear, won't you now, my dear, kind friend? I shall be so grateful. I will be dressed for the street by the time you come back."

"I hardly think you will be waylaid," he answered. "The trouble down-stairs will keep everybody out of the way."

"The trouble? What trouble?"

"Why, have you not heard? I thought everybody in the house knew. The hotel has been robbed. Several rooms have been entered, and valuables stolen, this morning."

"Oh my!" Her eyes dilated to double their size. She laid both hands impulsively on his arm, and looked with a frightened air into his face. "Robbed? Oh mercy! Why, it's too dreadful for anything! But you are only joking. You are trying to scare me."

"No indeed. It is solid fact."

"To think of it! And Roger and I are ever so careless. Wasn't it a mercy we stayed in our

rooms? We'd be sure to leave something about. And do you know somebody did try our door?"

"Is that so?" he asked. "When was that, Mrs. Sherman?"

"Oh, two hours ago. Only suppose the door had come open, and I had been there alone, and some dreadful man come in! I would have been scared out of every inch of my life. And I don't believe Roger would be much good, in such a case."

"I hardly think he would frighten off a big party," laughed Ralph. "But get ready, Mrs. Sherman. I will go see if the coast is clear."

"I am half afraid to let you go. You won't be long?"

"You may look for me in five minutes."

Ralph walked briskly away. The frightened young creature stood looking after him, with a look upon her face that meant anything but fright.

"Isn't he nice, and good-natured, and soft?" she said to herself. "I declare it is a shame to play on him. But—"

She shrugged her shoulders meaningly as she turned back to her room.

Ralph proceeded on his tour of investigation. There were but two persons whom it was necessary to avoid, and he fancied he knew where they were to be found. He hastened, accordingly, to the main floor of the hotel, where he had recently left these personages.

He found things very different there from their condition a short time before. The officers and the victims of the robbery had disappeared. Mr. Jones was not in his accustomed place. Neither of the persons for whom he was seeking were in sight.

"What has become of them all?" asked Ralph of one of the hotel employees. "They were raising Cain here a few minutes ago."

"Mr. Mulford has invited them to a private room, so that the detectives may have a chance to investigate the parties. I believe the rooms are to be examined next."

Ralph turned away after a few words more.

"Now is the time to get out my goslings," he believed. "If I leave them till the officers get up here they will be scared out of a week's feathers. I am not much afraid for Mrs. Sherman. But poor, little, bashful Roger, what a dear doll-baby of a man he is."

A very few minutes brought Ralph back to the door of the young married couple. Mrs. Sherman was waiting for him rather anxiously.

"I am not often nervous," she declared. "But you have just upset me by your burglar story. We are all ready. We are going to have ever so good a run. I suppose we can come back the same way we go?"

"Oh, yes."

"It will not be till after dark."

"Why don't you go to another hotel, Mrs. Sherman?"

"I am afraid to do anything. You see we've got to creep out only for a walk. I'll think it all over to-night, though. Come, Roger, we must hurry now."

She was dressed for the street, and held in her hand a large leather bag. Roger now appeared, also ready for a walk. He held a bag still larger than that of his wife.

"We are going shopping," she explained. "Roger didn't want to carry that bag, but I made him do it. I expect to buy considerable."

Ralph led the way, his proteges followed in a retreating, sly way that made him laugh. One might have imagined that they had some deep conspiracy in view, or were really escaping from the cells of a prison.

Their youthful conductor was in his element. This was spice to him. He was fond of adventure of any kind, and the kittenish ways of the young wife had quite won him over. He was bound to keep on the side of the runaways, and counter-march on their fathers. It was a romance exactly to his fancy.

"Oh, hush! What is that?" exclaimed Mrs. Sherman, in alarm. "Somebody is coming. What will we do?"

"It is only some of the chambermaids," suggested Ralph.

"No," exclaimed Mr. Sherman, with unwonted energy for him. "It is men's steps. They are coming up the stairs. Do you not hear them?" He clutched Ralph's arm nervously.

"Mercy on us, boy, don't be so scary!" was Ralph's scornful answer. "They are not sharks, and you are not minnows. Come this way."

He led into a side passage. The steps of heavy feet were now plainly audible, and he fancied that the committee of investigation was coming to examine the rooms.

He led on through a medley of passages. Finally they reached the private stairway of which he had spoken. This they descended, his followers manifesting an anxious haste which brought a smile of disdain to Ralph's face.

"What children they are," he said to himself. "It is natural, though, I suppose. They know no more about life than a monkey knows about horse-chestnuts."

Ere long they gained the ground floor of the hotel. They were in the servant's quarters, several of whom they met, who looked with surprise to see well-dressed guests in this region of the house.

Ralph winked knowingly to these persons, and led the way to a door that opened on a rear street.

"You are safe for a run now," he announced. "You can come back this same way. I presume you can find your way about."

"Oh, yes! Do not let us trouble you any longer. You have been ever so kind. Good-by, Mr. Ready."

"Good-day, you mean. It is hardly good by yet." He laughed as he turned back into the hotel.

The husband and wife looked knowingly at each other.

"I hope our darling young goose won't be too sure of that," remarked Mr. Sherman, in a tone of voice very different from that he had hitherto used.

CHAPTER VII.

INVESTIGATING A BURGLARY.

THE investigation of the robbery was going on in the private room of the Grand Central, to which Mr. Mulford had led the interested parties.

The detectives had made a close search into the subject, sharply questioning all the parties concerned. They had apparently failed to arrive at any satisfactory conclusions. All the losing parties were sure they had locked their room doors. Yet the rooms had been entered. By whom and how was the question. The thief must have possessed a master key to the hotel locks. Was it one of the employees?

"Who went through my trunk, that is what I want to find out?" demanded Judge Bluebottle angrily. "What the blazes is the use of your detectives if they can't answer a plain question like that?"

"Maybe we might answer it," replied one of the officers significantly, "but we are not yet prepared to answer anything. Where was your trunk at the time you think it was robbed?"

"Bless you, do you think I know all the ways and means of the hotel? Ask the clerk there. He's responsible."

"The trunks got slightly mixed up," replied Mr. Jones. "The trunks of these two gentlemen went to the rooms of a young married couple, named Sherman, where they remained for an hour."

"Ah!" said the detective. "That is an interesting fact. What became of the trunks of these married folks?"

"They got into the rooms of our two friends here, who opened them, and came down stairs in funny dresses."

Mr. Jones laughed at the recollection.

"Opened them, did they? How was this, gentlemen? Where did you get keys?"

"My key fit the trunk," cried the judge hastily. "And it was the copy of mine. I never thought of a blunder till I had it open."

"And did your key fit the trunk you received?" asked the officer of Mr. Benson.

"No. The trunk was not locked. I knew it was not mine, but I thought I might borrow a change of clothing."

A new laugh arose. Some of those present had seen him in his change of clothing.

"Is this mixing of trunks a usual thing?" asked the officer of Mr. Mulford.

"Not usual. I fancy some of our guests have made a mistake in selecting their baggage."

"What do you mean, sir? Is that an insinuation against me?" demanded the judge hotly. "Do you know who I am, sir?"

"Not yet, but I hope to know before long," was the cold and disdainful reply.

"I am Judge Bluebottle, of Duluth, sir. I can prove my words, sir. And I will chastise the man who dares say I ain't, sir."

The judge was on his feet, with a very red face, and swelling like a turkey cock.

"Keep cool, my dear sir. You will find that bluster is thrown away here. This investigation must go on, no matter where it hits."

"Who is hindering it, sirrah? I repel your insinuations. Do you dare call my honesty in question?"

"Not at all. I would only say that I want to understand how those trunks got mixed. Next I want to know how your key proved so good for opening strange baggage. Perhaps you have one that is equally good at opening strange doors. If not, how came you in room 407, last evening?"

This was a knock-down blow. The judge reddened and hesitated. The eyes of the detectives were fixed searchingly on his face. He stammered in replying.

"I—I was hunting Benson," he declared. "I mistook the room. The door was unlocked."

"Is that so, Mrs. Mason? You are in 407, I believe."

"I always lock my room door," replied the person addressed, a good-looking, showily-dressed lady, of an uncertain age. "I deny the allegation. I know it was locked this morning. And yet I lost a box of costly laces."

"If your room is the one spoken of, it was open last night," answered the judge, more calmly. "You will be claiming next that I am the thief. I, that am the greatest victim of the party."

"We have only your word for that," replied Mr. Mulford, with cold suspicion.

"And I'd have you know that my word is never called in question. By the great Rocky Mountain goat I'll knock the next man that calls me a thief into the middle of next week! I can prove who I am, sir. I am no base adventurer. I have been robbed in your hotel, and I am bound to be redressed, or somebody shall howl! You can't quiet me by calling me a thief. Now you hear that?"

"Come, come, judge," cautioned Mr. Benson, laying a hand on his arm. "There's no good in losing your temper. Keep cool. Accusation is nothing without proof."

"Losing my temper?" roared the irate Westerner. "Who says I'm losing my temper? I am cool, sir. Hang it, sir, I tell you I am cool! I'd like to see the man that dares say, I can't keep my temper." He glanced around the room with the fury of a caged hyena.

During this conversation the detectives had continued silent, closely watching the faces of the parties concerned. Doubtful parties will often weave the rope to hang themselves, if given a free opportunity. Just what conclusion the officers had come to did not appear. Their countenances were impassive. A marble statue would have shown as much emotion. One of the detectives now spoke.

"This recrimination is utterly useless," he said. "We cannot arrive at the truth by wild charges like these. It is best to get the evidence first ere we form conclusions. There are two parties whose testimony we absolutely need, ere any decision can be reached. Will you please send for Mr. and Mrs. Sherman?"

"Certainly," answered Mr. Mulford, turning to give an order.

"One moment," came a new voice. "Excuse me for interfering. But I would like to hear what is known about these people before they are brought here."

The person speaking was Mr. Ransome, the sharp-eyed individual whom Ralph believed to be the young bridegroom's father. So far during the investigation he had remained quietly leaning against a post, intently listening and observing. He now stepped forward.

"I have already told you all about them," cried Mr. Jones hastily and angrily. "It seems to me that you are very inquisitive about persons."

"I have my reasons, sir. You probably had your reasons for seeking to deceive me." There was a very sharp ring in his voice.

Mr. Jones colored and grew confused.

"You annoyed me by your questions," he declared.

"And you humbugged me with your answers. Or tried to do so."

"Come, come, gentlemen," exclaimed Mr. Mulford. "All this is useless. As for these persons we know nothing about them. They are new guests. A very young couple. Seems to be a runaway match."

"The lady small, pretty, with blue eyes, and flaxen hair?"

"Precisely. And the gentleman a good-looking youth. But painfully shy. Do you know them, sir?"

"That I cannot say. But I should advise that, instead of sending for these persons, we proceed to their room. If they are concerned in this business a moment's warning may give them an opportunity to dispose of important evidence."

"An excellent suggestion," replied one of the detectives. "It is necessary also to examine

the rooms which were entered. The thieves may have left their tracks."

"If Mr. Sharp has no objections, I will go with him to the room of the Shermans," remarked Mr. Ransome. "If I know them, as is possible, my knowledge may be useful."

"Certainly," replied Mr. Sharp, a little, wiry man. "It is best not to go in a body."

In a few minutes afterward the committee of investigation had entered the elevator, and were ascending to the upper floors. It was at the exact time that Ralph was prepared to set out with his seemingly verdant proteges.

They left the elevator on the third floor, upon which some of the thefts had been committed. While one detective prepared to examine the rooms upon this floor, Mr. Sharp, in company with Mr. Ransome, ascended the stairs to the floor above, on their special mission. They were accompanied by the hotel-clerk, who had taken a severe dislike to the sharp-eyed and inquisitive stranger.

It was their steps upon the stairs that had caused the rapid retreat of the Shermans and their guide.

In a few moments the detectives' party reached their goal.

"This is the room. No. 249," remarked Mr. Jones. "I presume they are within. They are a pair of sadly-scared runaways, who have been afraid to step outside their room door. They seem to be in mortal terror of pursuit by their parents. Have had their meals sent to their room."

An odd look came upon Mr. Ransome's face, as he listened to this information.

The detective knocked. No answer came. He repeated it sharply. Still all was silent within.

"They are asleep, or they are out," he declared, with a rat-tat on the door loud enough to awaken the dead.

A pause followed. All continued in utter silence.

"Evidently the room is empty," he considered. "Your guests have got over their fright and have gone out."

"It would seem so," remarked Mr. Jones.

"Can you open the door? It is important that the room be examined."

"Certainly. I will obtain a key."

Mr. Jones departed, leaving his companions to await his return. They waited in silence, few words passing between them.

In a few minutes the remainder of the party ascended to the upper floor. They had finished their search below.

The process was rapidly completed. Room after room was opened and examined, but nothing in the way of evidence appeared. The thief or thieves had left none of those tell-tale tracks which the sharpest criminals so often leave behind them.

"These have been no common rogues," muttered the detectives. "A practiced hand has been at work here."

"Mighty well up in bad practices," growled the judge. "Here is my room." He threw open the room door as he spoke. "And yonder is my trunk. I wish you would tell me who went through it. It isn't the cash, sir, though five hundred is a pretty sum. But they've robbed me of papers that are worth thousands. Thousands, sir."

The detective had entered, and was casting his eyes around the room with professional sharpness.

"I should like to see the inside of your trunk," he coldly said to the judge.

"Certainly. Certainly. I want you to examine everything. Hang me if it isn't a pretty go, to be robbed first, and then accused of stealing afterward. When this business is over I'm going to have my turn."

He glared angrily at Mr. Mulford as he spoke.

The detective, with little attention to this angry bluster, knelt before the open trunk, and began a minute examination of its contents.

He rose to his feet after a few minutes, holding in his hand a narrow piece of ribbon, of a peculiar shade of red.

"Does anybody recognize this article?" he asked.

Mrs. Mason sprang forward and snatched it from his hand, looking at it with eager eyes.

"It is mine!" she declared. "I can swear to it. I left it in my room this morning. It was tied in a bow, but has been opened. You can see the creases, and the pin-holes."

She held it up triumphantly, and fixed her eyes with an accusing glance on the disturbed face of Judge Bluebottle.

"Yours!" he cried excitedly. "I'll swear, then, it never went into that trunk by my

hands. There is some confounded rascality and mystery behind this."

"No mystery at all," answered the detective coldly. "It is only one of those blind errors that thieves are constantly making. You are my prisoner, sir." His hand fell heavily on the judge's shoulder.

"Me? By the eternal—"

"There. Save your breath. You will need it elsewhere. I arrest you on the charge of robbing the rooms of the Grand Central Hotel."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CAT OUT OF THE BAG.

MR. SHARP looked keenly about the room of the Shermans, to which he had just been admitted. Mr. Ransome stood, with folded arms, leaning in his usual easy attitude against the door-post quietly looking on.

"Your shy birds have flown from their nest, at any rate," remarked the detective. "We must wait for their return before we can examine them. The room looks all right. It has been only temporarily deserted."

He was closely examining the apartment as he spoke. Several articles of clothing hung on the wall hooks, or were thrown over chair-backs. The bed was rumpled, as if it had been recently used. Some hair-pins and a bit of ribbon lay on the bureau. There was nothing of a suspicious character.

"Just as I told you," remarked the hotel clerk, with a triumphant glance at Mr. Ransome. "It is ridiculous to suppose that this boy and girl had anything to do with the robbery."

"Perhaps not," was the quiet reply. "Yet you will please bear in mind that they had the trunks of your two Western guests for an hour in their room. Both the parties claim to have been robbed. In a question of this kind, my dear sir, the improbable often proves the true. What do you think, Mr. Sharp?"

"You are quite correct, sir," replied the officer. "I must say that you have the proper idea."

He continued his investigation with the shrewd expertness of a professional, yet nothing appeared to give warrant for the slightest suspicion.

"There only remain the trunks," he at length said. "We must await the return of their owners before we can open them."

"Why not open them yourself?" inquired Mr. Ransome.

"Because we have no key, and nothing has appeared to warrant our forcing them open."

"I fancy not," came another voice. "The business is ended. The thief has been found."

The speaker was one of the other section of the party.

"The deuce you say! Who is this thief then?"

"The blustering old Western sharp that christens himself Judge Bluebottle. Some of the stolen goods were found in his trunk. The job is nailed on the heavy rascal."

At this moment the remainder of the party came by, the officer with a hand on the arm of the prisoner, who was fiercely protesting.

"Hang your ugly picture, if I don't make you sweat for this, the saints help me!" he ejaculated. "I'm well known, sir. I can prove my character. I'm a member of the Legislature. I'm a Minnesota judge. Do you hear me, sir? I can bring a cart-load of testimonies as to who I am."

"We have one testimony that will not quite fill a cart, but it will answer," the officer quietly replied. "When you explain how Mrs. Mason's ribbon got into your trunk your case will look clearer than it does now."

"Explain it, sir? I don't pretend to explain it. I know nothing about it. There's some infernal conspiracy to ruin me. But you're barking up the wrong tree. If you know when you're well off you won't wake up old Bluebottle."

Mr. Sharp spoke in a low tone with his associate. He then turned to Mr. Jones.

"You may lock this room again," he remarked. "We seem to have found the tree that bore the apple. However, you will please advise me when the Shermans return. They may give some useful evidence."

The officers walked on with their prisoner. There remained behind Mr. Ransome and the clerk. Mr. Benson also left the party and joined them. His face was marked by an expression of anxiety.

"I am sorry for old Bluebottle," he said. "He seems such a bluff, hearty sort of a chap. But I am afraid he is a sly rascal, and that this bluster is all play. I tried a game of poker with

him and he fingered the cards on me shamefully. This young man can tell you that."

He referred to Ralph, who had just walked up with a very much surprised face.

"That is so," he admitted. "You were cheated badly. But I did not know you perceived it."

"You opened my eyes," was the answer. "But the old rat was a bungler after all. When I saw his game I played a little counter of my own on him, and cleaned him square out. Taught him a lesson, I fancy."

A laugh followed this admission.

"What is the trouble?" asked Ralph.

"We have hit on the robber," replied Mr. Jones. "It is the man we suspected, old Bluebottle. A precious rogue he is. He is good for a five years' visit to the penitentiary. But where are the Shermans, Ralph? I did not think those mice would stir from their holes."

"They have gone out for a run," answered Ralph. "I piloted them out by the back stairway. You never saw such a pair of scared sparrows in your life."

Mr. Ransome stood in his usual lounging position, twisting a piece of paper between his fingers. It was a curl-paper which he had picked up from the floor near the bureau. His sharp eyes, which had been fixed on Mr. Benson's face, were now transferred to Ralph's.

"What are they scared about?" he asked.

Ralph looked hastily up, with ill-concealed alarm.

"Oh, only that they are not used to city life, and imagine all sorts of ridiculous notions. They fancy everybody is going to victimize them." He spoke in a tone of assumed carelessness.

"Come, come, Ralph, that won't do," exclaimed Mr. Jones. "There is no use trying to conceal what everybody knows. It is a runaway match, gentlemen. They are a couple of young geese, from somewhere West, and are in mortal dread of being overtaken and spanked by their daddies."

Ralph started in alarm and indignation. He had laid out a neat scheme to humbug the fathers of the runaways, and keep his promise, and here was his plan utterly destroyed. He cast a look of fury at Mr. Jones, and then one of surprise at the two others, who displayed none of the emotion he had expected.

The only expression on Mr. Benson's face was one of slight chagrin. He had withdrawn a step, and stood looking with covert uneasiness at Mr. Ransome.

"I hope their parents will overtake them," said the latter carelessly. "I don't like these baby marriages."

Ralph looked at him with wide-open eyes.

"What," he cried, "you don't mean—"

"Nothing more than I said."

"Then you are not the father of the young gentleman?"

"I his father?" It was Mr. Ransome's turn to look surprised. "What do you mean by such nonsense? I am nobody's father."

"And you are not the father of the bride?" He addressed Mr. Benson.

"Not if I know myself," rejoined Mr. Benson, with a somewhat strained laugh.

"Then all I've got to say is that they are a pair of blooming young liars," cried Ralph energetically. "They didn't just say you were their fathers; but they acted it all out. Why, they saw you in the supper-room last night, and were scared out of a week's growth." This was addressed to Mr. Ransome.

"I saw them," he quietly replied, "and thought they acted strangely. I cannot imagine what ails them. Mistook me for somebody else, probably. Folks with guilty consciences start from a shadow." His tone was very calm and even, his face destitute of expression. "There is no use to examine their rooms any further," he continued. "If the detective found nothing, we are not likely to. I hardly fancy that babes in the woods like these are burglars."

The speaker turned on his heel and walked away, as if weary of the whole business. Mr. Benson followed him, with an undecided expression of face. Ralph looked at Mr. Jones with curious inquiry.

"There is some mighty queer dodge here," he exclaimed. "What did they mean by letting on that these two men were their fathers, and that they were afraid of being captured by them?"

"They meant to play a trick on you, Ralph," laughed Mr. Jones, as he closed and locked the room door. "They are practical jokers, and have got one in on you."

"It looks like it," he rejoined, with a thoughtful expression. "I thought all along that that

girl was anything but a baby. All right for them, but it's my turn next."

"Look out, Ralph," answered Mr. Jones, still laughing. "You'll get in a worse pickle. They are too sharp for you."

"Very well, then. But if they fool me with my eyes open they can eat me, that's all."

"Go down to the Central station," continued the clerk. "Bring me word of the Bluebottle hearing."

"Ay, ay," answered Ralph, walking away with a downcast expression.

Mr. Ransome had by this time left the hotel. He walked steadily on to the corner of the next street. Here he turned shortly on his heel and looked back, like one that dreads pursuit. A quick, searching glance satisfied him, and he continued his walk.

A few minutes brought him to the vicinity of the municipal buildings of the city. Here he again paused, and stood a few minutes in a lounging attitude on the steps of the mayor's office. Nothing seemed to escape the glances of his very keen eyes.

He suddenly turned and disappeared within the building. Here he sought the office of the chief of police, and was fortunate enough to find that functionary alone and disengaged.

A long and apparently interesting conversation followed. It had not proceeded far ere the judge left his office and sent private messages by the police telegraph to every station in the city. He also dispatched an officer, in citizen's dress, to the Grand Central Hotel, with special instructions.

This done, he returned and resumed his conference with Mr. Ransome. Their conversation continued for some time longer. At length Mr. Ransome rose.

"Then you agree with me that the prisoner had best not have a hearing to-night?"

"Yes. If he is discharged it might ruin our plans. And to hold him as convicted does not seem desirable."

"I would be sorry to have him locked up in one of your horrible police-cells over night. He is really an estimable character. Could not bail be managed?"

"Certainly," answered the chief, with a knowing wink. "I will see that it is done. A political friend of the judge, you know."

"Very good. The chance that our birds will fly back to this nest is a frightfully slim one, of course. But human nature is a queer affair. We must take every precaution. If they should be blind enough to return we must do nothing to scare them off. If not"—he shrugged his shoulders significantly—"we have a difficult game to play."

A half-hour afterward Judge Bluebottle was brought up before a police-magistrate. He was still boiling over with indignation, and commenced a fierce tirade, which the magistrate with some difficulty cut short.

"Please save your ammunition until you see your bird," he cuttingly remarked. "I cannot give you a hearing to-night. Your case must lay over until morning. Officer, please remove the prisoner."

"Excuse me," said a red-faced man standing near. "It is an outrage to lock up a gentleman in your station-cells. I know Judge Bluebottle. I will go his bail."

"Very well, Mr. Blondin. The bail is fixed at two thousand dollars. Shall I draw up a bail bond?"

"Certainly. I don't care a fig for the amount. I fancy I am good for it."

The prisoner stood gazing at his friend with open-mouthed surprise, as he signed the necessary papers.

"You are free for to-night," remarked the magistrate coldly. "You will appear at this office at ten o'clock to-morrow for a hearing."

The released prisoner turned impulsively to his friend, and warmly seized his hand.

"I don't know who the blazes you are," he exclaimed, "but I'll be shot if you ain't a straight man."

"I know who you are, then," was the reply. "Come, judge, let's have something warm on this. It's my treat."

Mr. Ransome rose from a shadowy corner and followed them from the room.

CHAPTER IX.

RALPH GETS AN EYE-OPENER.

THE hearing of Judge Bluebottle on a charge of robbery of the rooms of the Grand Central Hotel, was concluded. The evidence against him was not great, yet it seemed decisive.

Ralph Ready had testified to two circumstances. One of these was the transparent cheating at cards by the prisoner. This was ruled

out, as having no bearing on the case. The other was, that he had seen the prisoner coming out of the open door of 407, Mrs. Mason's room.

"It is all a mistake," roared the prisoner. "I was looking for Benson. Why don't people lock their doors?"

"Who is Benson?" asked the magistrate.

"I don't know who the blazes he is! Some jack-a-daisy. He says he knows me, but I never saw the chap before—I'll swear that!"

"What did you want with him, then?"

"He salted me out of a fifty at poker, and I wanted revenge, that's all."

"Did you look in the bureau-drawers for Benson?" asked the magistrate. "And did you take this as a memento?" He held up the piece of ribbon.

"If I ever saw the confounded strip of dry-goods before, I'll be shot!"

"Mrs. Mason."

The lady witness stepped forward.

Her testimony was to the effect that nothing had been taken from her room at the time in question. She had worn the bow on the evening of that day. The robbery had taken place on the succeeding day. As to her room-door, she was sure that she always locked it.

Her evidence that the ribbon was undoubtedly hers, and the testimony of the officer that he had found it in the prisoner's trunk, closed the examination.

"The prisoner stands committed for trial," coldly remarked the magistrate, as he drew some blanks from a drawer, and commenced writing.

"It's a blamed sweet country," cried the judge, "where they hang a man for a bit of ribbon as long as a baby's finger. If I plundered the hotel, where is the rest of the stuff? Tell me that."

There was no answer.

A man had entered the room from behind, and was whispering to the magistrate. The latter nodded approvingly.

"Has the prisoner bail to offer for his appearance at court?" he asked.

The red-faced man who had gone bail before, stepped briskly forward.

"I will continue on the bail bond," he remarked.

"Excuse me, Mr. Blondin. The bail is increased. Five thousand is the smallest sum I can accept on so serious a charge."

"Very well, sir. I will be surety for that amount."

The accused man rushed forward and grasped Blondin's hand with effusive emotion.

"You're a boss, sir! You're a high-toned boss! Blame me if I knew they grew that sort around here. Just you come out to Duluth, and if I don't give you a lively shake out, then set me down for a half-primed blower. The idea of a man of my standing stealing a bit of woman's finery! What would I do with it? Won't somebody tell me? Wouldn't I make a sweet dude with a red silk bow on my coat collar? Pish on such nonsense!"

A laugh followed at the utter disgust of the old fellow's tone. He touched his bailman on the shoulder.

"Come, Blondin, we'll have a whisky smash on this. You're a man, you are. Shoot me if I could say that for everybody I've got my eyes on!"

They left the room together, followed by most of those present. There was a peculiar expression on Ralph Ready's face as he left the magistrate's office. He seemed dreadfully depressed and downcast. Something had happened to deprive him of his usual confident enthusiasm.

He had reached the pavement outside when his progress was arrested by a touch on his shoulder. He turned quickly. There stood a man in the uniform of a police officer.

"One moment, young man," said the latter briefly. "You are wanted inside."

"I am? Who wants me?"

"That you will soon learn. Follow me."

"Not much," answered Ralph, shortly. "I ain't no wooden man, to move when you turn a peg. If you're arresting me show your warrant. If not, say what you want. That's my programme."

The officer laughed heartily.

"You are a prime young one," he admitted. "I am not arresting you, my lad. But the chief of police wants to see you in relation to this robbery."

"That's a horse of another color. Why didn't you say so half an hour ago? Go ahead, I'm after you."

The chief's office was a retired room in the interior of the building. It was so dim and shady

that Ralph, coming out of the bright sunshine, was not able at first to clearly see the faces of the persons present. He could merely make out two individuals, one a stout person, the other tall and spare.

"What is your name?" asked the stout person, who sat at a desk, pen in hand.

"Ralph Ready."

"You are employed at the Grand Central Hotel?"

"Yes, sir."

"I wish to know something about two of the guests of that hotel; a young married couple, registered under the name of Sherman. They left the hotel stealthily yesterday afternoon. Have they yet returned?"

Ralph did not answer. His eyes had now grown accustomed to the dim light of the room, and he recognized, with a start of surprise, the tall man as Mr. Ransome.

"You here!" he ejaculated.

"Yes," was the smiling response. "I am interested in this business."

"You have not answered my question," said the chief.

"And I don't intend to," rejoined Ralph, with a sudden freezing up. "I am not under oath. I want to know what sort of a trap this is before I walk into it."

He stolidly seated himself, and laid his hat on a table. He had no notion of being used as a blind tool.

The chief turned and fixed his eyes on the young man with the look of one who was not used to refusals. It was a glance that had made many a criminal quail, but it had no effect on Ralph. He was wide awake enough to know that he could laugh at police threats.

At this moment the office door opened and an officer entered. He handed the chief several papers. The latter read them carefully, and then passed them with a smile to Mr. Ransome. Ralph opened his eyes with surprise. Who was this stranger? How had he come into the confidence of the chief of police? What did it all mean?

"Very satisfactory," remarked Mr. Ransome, on quickly reading the papers.

"They are in the city yet."

"And have not returned to the hotel. You need not answer, Mr. Ready."

"I don't intend to," replied Ralph sturdily. "You can make a witness of me, if you want. But you can't make a fool of me."

"See here, my sharp boy," remarked the chief severely, wheeling his chair around to face Ralph. "Do you know that you have been assisting criminals to escape from the law?"

If he thought to frighten Ralph by this assertion he was somewhat mistaken. The boy was utterly at a loss to know what all this meant, but he did not scare easily.

"I don't see what you are driving at," he declared. "If you mean that pair of spooney lovers they haven't come back yet. They have got lost somewhere about the city I judge, for they are green as geese. You ain't intending to hint that those babies had anything to do with the robbery? Why, the detective searched their room as sharp as a cat after a mouse, and he didn't find a sign."

"Did they take nothing with them when they went out?"

"They both had good-sized leather hand-bags. They were going shopping, they said."

"Did you notice whether those bags appeared to be full or empty?" asked Mr. Ransome.

"They had a sort of fat swell in them."

A smile passed between the two men.

"See here, my boy," remarked Mr. Ransome, suddenly. "We have no wish to keep you in the dark. The hotel was robbed by the Shermans, and you have been humbugged by them. This is a matter which it is necessary to keep secret, but I have a reason for telling it to you."

"You will have to prove it to me," answered Ralph, with sturdy doubt. "For I don't believe a word of it."

The two men conversed in a low tone for a minute, while the obdurate witness fixed his eyes obstinately on the ceiling. He declared to himself that this was all fudge. It was out of the question that that pair of stray babies could be the hotel robbers.

"Why, old Bluebottle has been convicted of the robbery," he suddenly broke out. "Mrs. Mason's ribbon was found in his trunk."

"Don't be too sure of that," replied Mr. Ransome. "It is not so safe to swear to a strip of ribbon. The color is peculiar, it is true; but we can't hang men on the color of ribbons. Here is the article. Have you ever seen anything like it before?"

Ralph took the strip of silken tissue, and looked at it closely. A growing suspicion came into his eyes as he did so.

"I have," he answered, in a low tone. "Mrs. Sherman wore a ribbon in her hair of that exact color, when she came to the hotel."

His hearers gave a slight start at this information.

"Are you sure of that?" asked the chief, taking up his pen.

"Very sure. I'm not color blind."

"Did she wear it as a bow?"

"No. It was open, as it is now."

"When did you last see her wearing it?"

"Not after the first time. She wore blue afterward."

"This is important evidence," remarked Mr. Ransome. "The Irish porter was sent for the trunks which had been taken by mistake to their room. He was kept waiting, on the plea that they were not dressed. May they not have been examining the judge's trunk at that moment? In their haste to complete their work the ribbon may have been dislodged from the woman's head, and dropped unnoticed into the trunk."

"It is an important fact," replied the chief. "This ribbon has never formed a bow. The creases are not in the correct position. These have been made by an irregular crumpling."

Ralph listened with open mouth and eyes. To what was all this to lead? And why had he been taken into the confidence of the authorities?

"One word more," said Mr. Ransome. "You have told me that the detective made a thorough search of the room of the Shermans. Permit me to say that he overlooked one important piece of evidence. Will you please read what is written on this scrap of paper?"

He handed Ralph a scrap of writing paper. It was very much creased and crumpled, but had been smoothed out. It seemed a portion of a letter, and contained some torn lines of writing, to the following effect:

"* * * * * at Philadelphia, the 16th Sep-
* * * * * chance of success if we
* * * * * the old game.

"Yours truly, NORAH B."

"That served your young lady friend as a curl paper," remarked Mr. Ransome.

"But I don't understand it," declared Ralph. "There is nothing here but a name."

"Excuse me. There is considerably more. I happen to know what sort of a game 'the old game' is. And Norah B. means more to me than Eliza Sherman. Dolt that I was to let them escape me again, when I had them under my thumb!"

Ralph started up in excitement. The meaning of all this was beginning to get into his brain. And he began to see that he had been frightfully humbugged by his innocent-seeming proteges.

"Who are they then?" he demanded. "They were scared when they saw you, and got out of the room with handkerchiefs to their faces. I helped to cover them?"

"I know you did," answered Mr. Ransome. "And you did it so well that I could not fairly see them. Your ass of a clerk also threw me off the track. He was too confounded smart."

"But the young fellow made believe you was his father," faltered Ralph.

"Don't mind that, Mr. Ready," said Mr. Ransome, in a kindly tone. "They have fooled older persons than you. Even smart detectives have been deceived by this innocent pair."

"Who are they then?"

"The most dangerous hotel thieves in the United States. They have just made a round of the West, where they made a rich haul. They have come here to ply their trade in the East. The Grand Central escaped better than it would have done but that they saw me."

"Ah! But they are so young."

"Not so young as they look," answered Mr. Ransome, with a laugh. "They are good at masquerading. They may be quiet old folks from the country at their next hotel."

"And to think that I was sold so cheap!" cried Ralph. "I hid them from their daddies! I led them out the back way! I played watch-dog for a pair of sharps! Oh, won't somebody kick me! You needn't try to knock my brains out, for I haven't got any."

"Are you going to take this sell quietly?" asked Mr. Ransome, with a smile.

"Not much am I!" ejaculated Ralph. "I bet I get even with those shy ducks yet. The sweet spoons! I'm going for them flat-footed."

"That is why I sent for you," remarked Mr. Ransome. "You have seen them. You should know their faces even under a disguise."

"I couldn't be fooled easy."
"Then I want your help. I have come East in pursuit of these sharpers. But they will not be easily captured, and we must move very carefully. Can I trust you to keep silent?"
"I bet you can! I'm your boy square out. They've had their sell on me. It's my innings now."

CHAPTER X.

LOCKS AND LOCKETS.

"THERE'S a confoundedly smart party of them!" said Ralph to himself, as he balanced himself on two legs of a chair. "There are a pair of smart detectives. There's a smart Benson, and a mighty smart Ransome. There's a smart chief of police, and a howling smart pair of Shermans. There's only one blazing fool in the company, and that's me. To think of the neat way I was taken in and done for! I've half a mind to have a prize-fight of my own, hang me if I haven't! To stand up before a looking-glass and punch my own head."

He laughed to himself at this neat way of punishing himself for his folly.

"I ain't all a fool," he continued. "But if I set my smartness to fight with my foolishness, I don't know which would whip. Anyhow I'm not going to be discounted by all these smart folks. I'm appointed amateur detective, and I bet I don't disgrace the office."

He held his note-book open in his hand, at a well-filled page, on which his eyes were fixed.

"The wise traveler lays out his road before he starts on his journey," he muttered. "Now if I'm going to act detective, I'm not going to blind. They want to use me for a cat's-paw to pull their chestnuts from the fire. Not much, I fancy. I'll let this Ransome see that a boy has some brains. First question, who is Ransome and who is Benson, and what are they after? They ain't the Shermans' daddies. That point's settled. But the Shermans know them. I take it that Ransome is a Western detective, who is on their track. He is too ridiculously wide-awake to be anything else. But who is Benson, and what is his little game? That's the first matter on the programme."

He made some fresh notes in his book, then thrust it into his pocket, and sprung to his feet. There was one thing to be done immediately; to find out who was responsible for the mistake in sending the trunks to the wrong rooms. Possibly that might put him on the trail of the thieves.

Ralph was impulsively proceeding toward the baggage-room of the hotel, when he was accosted by Mr. Jones. The latter was in company with Mr. Ransome and Mr. Benson, whom he left standing in the hall, while he hurried after the rapid-moving lad.

"Stop there, you will-of-the-wisp," laughed the clerk. "You must be in a terrible hurry. I want you to go after a locksmith. You know where to find the nearest. Tell him to come at once, and bring his keys. There are some trunks to be opened."

"All right," cried Ralph. "I'll have him here in a twinkling."

He instantly divined that the object was to examine the trunks of the Shermans. He laughed in his sleeve as he proceeded on his mission.

"Little they will find there," he said to himself. "These cute coons are not the sort to leave any clew behind them. They are too wide awake to be snapped up easily. I can tell Mr. Ransome that much."

A few minutes sufficed to complete his errand. He fortunately found the locksmith in and at leisure. The latter armed himself with a formidable bunch of keys, and accompanied the young messenger back to the hotel.

The committee of investigation awaited their return in room 249.

"We wish these trunks opened," said Mr. Jones. "Will there be any difficulty about it?"

"I fancy not," replied the locksmith, after a glance at the locks.

He knelt before Mrs. Sherman's trunk, and began operations with his keys. The others waited. Mr. Ransome had taken his usual easy attitude, leaning negligently against the door-jamb, with an expression as if he had no concern in the result. Mr. Benson stood resting one hand on the table, with his eyes fixed with undisguised eagerness on the smith. Ralph rested on the bed, covertly watching Benson, whom for some reason he mistrusted.

"Told you so," remarked the locksmith, as a sharp click told of success. "These are only common locks. No difficulty about them."

He threw open the lid of the trunk and pro-

ceeded to the other. A glance showed that the trunk was nearly empty. Its contents did not quarter fill it.

Mr. Jones at once hurried forward and began lifting out the articles of female apparel, which he closely examined and then handed to Mr. Benson. The third member of the party did not move from his position by the door. He took part in the investigation only with his eyes.

"The cunning jade has cleared out her dry-goods amazingly," remarked Mr. Jones. "There's nothing left but some well-worn bits of women's rigging."

"And nothing suspicious," added Mr. Benson, as he let fall the last garment handed him.

"I hardly expected anything," declared Mr. Ransome. "These are old birds. They have been in the hands of the law before now, but they never leave a scrap of evidence behind them. It is not easy to convict such shrewd thieves."

Ralph kept his eyes fixed on Benson's face. It may have been pure fancy, but he conjectured that he saw there a concealed uneasiness.

Ere the search of the trunk was finished the locksmith had succeeded in opening the other. Mr. Benson at once knelt beside it and hastened to examine its contents. It was even more sparsely filled than the former.

"These folks travel with very few clothes," he laughed, as he stirred up the scattered contents, "or else they must have managed to carry all their valuable effects with them."

"They took only hand-bags," remarked Ralph. "Not much could have gone that way."

"Did you notice their appearance?" asked Mr. Ransome, easily. "Any difference of size, for instance?"

"Why, now you speak of it, they did seem to be stouter."

"I thought so," he smiled. "It is surprising what a trunkful of clothes an old hand can wear. Quite likely, too, they were light in baggage to begin with. Folks in their line don't care to be overloaded."

Ralph gave a slight start. He had kept his eyes fixed on Mr. Benson, who was searching the pockets of Mr. Sherman's clothing. He was sure the searcher had found something, which he held skillfully concealed in the palm of his hand. He rose easily to his feet, holding a garment dangling in the air.

"Like husband, like wife," he remarked. "They are not such fools as to leave any evidence behind them. Here is a pair of neat drab breeches, Mr. Jones."

He held out the garment with his right hand, while he slipped his left carelessly in his pocket.

"We are on the wrong track if we expect to find any hanging matter here," he continued. "I am tired of the fruitless task."

He seated himself easily in a rocking-chair.

"You can finish the search. I give up all hopes of my missing fifty. At any rate I am square. I won that much from Judge Blue-bottle."

Ralph listened with an air of great innocence. But he was saying to himself:

"You're sharp, Benson, but it won't work. I'm bound to find out what you put in that left-hand pocket. Maybe that's the key to the whole game."

Mr. Ransome had not stirred from his lounging attitude. A faint, disdainful smile marked his beardless mouth.

"That will do," he said. "You may as well return the goods, and lock the trunks. Mark to be called for. I fancy you will have them to sell for unclaimed baggage. And now, gentlemen, all that are present know my object. I must request that it be kept secret."

"Certainly," answered Jones and Benson together. "We will not breathe a word."

"If I can be of any assistance, command my services," continued Mr. Benson. "I do not enjoy being victimized by these young sharks."

"Thanks," replied Mr. Ransome. "I shall not forget your offer."

By this time the articles were carelessly replaced in the trunks, and the latter locked. The party left the room together.

They walked along the hall, conversing on the subject of their late search. Ralph managed to station himself on the left side of Mr. Benson, but that gentleman persistently kept his hand in his pocket. Whatever object was concealed there was not to be come at easily.

Some stratagem must be used to make him take his hand from his pocket. The busy brain of the boy thought of a hundred, but he could hit on nothing that seemed feasible.

"Excuse me, Mr. Jones," he suddenly cried.

"You have dropped your handkerchief. Here it is."

He thrust out his hand with a handkerchief with such awkward haste as to nearly knock Mr. Benson's hat from his head.

"Mercy on us, boy, look out how you go," cried the latter angrily, as he hastily caught with his left hand at his falling tile.

"Pardon me," cried Ralph humbly, "it was an accident."

"You are always so ridiculously hasty, Ralph," remarked Mr. Jones severely.

"I wish you would show me how to break myself of it," answered Ralph, with increased humility.

Mr. Jones looked sharply around at him. This humble tone was a new one. He saw that the boy's eyes were sparkling, as if with mischief. He knew Ralph well enough to know that there was some joke afoot, though what it was he could not imagine.

Ralph lagged behind the others as they walked on, continuing their conversation. At length he quickly stepped into the open doorway of an empty room. His bright eyes were full of malicious triumph.

"Done it, by the hokey!" he ejaculated, slapping his knee with satisfaction. "Went through old Benson's pocket the neatest way out. Now let's see what my prize comes to."

He held in his hand a neatly-folded slip of paper, which he had managed to extract from Mr. Benson's coat pocket while that gentleman was hastily striving to hinder his hat from falling.

Ralph opened this missive with an air of hopeful expectancy. But a puzzled look came upon his face on reading the document.

"What in the world does it mean, anyhow?" he asked himself. "It looks all like tomfoolery. Wonder if it isn't a set of copy-book extracts?"

The document was certainly a very mysterious, or a very silly one. It ran as follows:

"In handsome actions lie good deeds. At five miles you cannot bring down your bird. Broad chestnuts are the best for roasting. Saturday afternoon is everybody's holiday."

That was all. Ralph scratched his head in perplexity.

"Why, hang it all, there's no sense in the confounded thing! The chap must be an idiot. Maybe I'm one," he continued, with a sudden thought. "Likely there's a secret meaning in that document. I've got it in my head anyhow, and I must manage to get this back in Benson's pocket. Won't do to let him think he is suspected."

He hurried after the others, revolving various schemes in his mind. They had paused by an open window at the end of the hall. Mr. Jones had just paid the locksmith for his trouble, and dismissed him.

"Will you smoke, gentlemen?" he asked, drawing some cigars from his pocket.

They both answered in the affirmative. He struck a match, but a puff of air through the upon window extinguished it.

"Here is a light," said Ralph, who had again joined them.

He presented a blazing match to Mr. Benson, who took it in his right hand, but was obliged to shield it with his left from the wind.

The alert lad took instant advantage of the opportunity to drop the folded paper in the unguarded pocket.

They stood there a few minutes, smoking and talking. Mr. Benson was very lively, yet Ralph fancied that his vivacity was not quite natural.

"I hope you will succeed, Mr. Ransome," he remarked, in a hearty manner. "I am sure I will lend you all my aid."

His hand dropped again into his pocket.

Ralph, who was covertly watching him, noticed a slight change of expression, and a look of satisfaction.

"Thought he had dropped something," was Ralph's sarcastic thought. "Finds that he hasn't. It's all lovely now. But I would give something costly to know what the confounded nonsense on that document means."

They walked on, Mr. Ransome conversing fluently about his intentions, and his plans for discovering the thieves.

"I doubt if they are in the city," he remarked. "But I have their description, and will immediately telegraph to the authorities in all the neighboring places."

Ralph looked at him. The thought came to his mind that all this innocent confidence might be assumed. Was Mr. Ransome seeking to pull wool over Benson's eyes?

"See here, Ralph," exclaimed Mr. Jones, a half-hour afterward. "This is your own hand-

kerchief. What did you mean by giving it to me as mine?"

"You don't say so! Well, I declare, so it is! How came I to make such a blunder?"

Ralph's tone was the perfection of innocent surprise.

CHAPTER XI.

RALPH SHOWS HIS HAND.

"FAIX an' I niver know what ye mane, at all, at all."

It was Mike O'Flaherty who spoke. He was seated on a trunk in the baggage-room, face to face with Ralph Ready.

"That cat won't jump, Mike. Do you calculate I didn't see through your little game from the start? Don't see anything green here, do you?" He touched his eye, and gave Mike a significant wink.

"Sure, an' I've a notion ye see double, now and then. It's aisy fur some folks to see what niver happened."

"You may as well own up the corn, old chap. You can't fool this chicken. I am not going to use it against you, and I don't care how much he gave you. But I want to know which of them it was."

"Which of 'em, is it?"

"Just so."

"As long as ye know so much, maybe ye'd best guess the balance. It's not I as will stand in your way."

"All right, Mike." Ralph rose from his seat with a resolute expression of countenance. "If you won't tell me there are those you will. I didn't intend to report this business, but it seems I'll have to."

"What in the world is the use o' bein' so dis-agrayable about it?" ejaculated Mike, in alarm at this threat. "I'm obliged to be sacret. But if ye'll not spake of it—"

"N-er a word, Mike. On my honor."

"Thin it was the red-faced one, with the wrinkled up eyes. I know his name no more nor the man in the moon."

"He engaged you to take the trunks to the wrong rooms? And paid you for doing it?"

"Whist, ye spalpeen! It'll be the ruination of me if ye talk so loud. Faix, an' it was only a beggarly dollar he gave me; and ye're welcome to the half o' it, this minute."

"Nary time, Mike," laughed Ralph. "You're not going to get me into your scrapes. I'll let up on you this time, but if there's any more of this thing you'll get your walking-papers, sure pop."

"It was only a bit of a joke, as he told me," protested Mike.

"A sorry joke, Mike. See here, I want you to keep mum. Don't breathe this to a soul."

"Me br'athe it, is it? Is it a fool ye take me fur, thin? Ye'll be sayin' next that Mike O'Flaherty was brought up on buttermilk and praties."

"All right, Mike. Mum's the word," Ralph laughed, as he left the room.

"Good," he cried gayly, as soon as he was out of hearing. "It pays sometimes to work on a guess. I just caromed the truth out of the rascal. Benson is the chap that had the trunks mixed. There's no mistake about it. He's a partner of the thieves."

Ralph walked slowly on, thinking over the job he had in hand. There was one thing he was specially troubled about, the mysterious document he had extracted from Mr. Benson's pocket. He had already spent two hours trying to make out the meaning of that strange communication, but was as far from it as ever.

"It is a warning of some kind, I'm sure of that," he told himself. "Anybody could see that Benson was on the lookout for something, and that he was satisfied the minute he got that paper. There's some confounded secret in it."

His reverie was interrupted by Mr. Ransome, who came up at that moment. His sharp eyes were fixed keenly on the face of his young assistant.

"Anything in the wind, my boy?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. Where can we have a private chat?"

"Here."

Ralph opened the door of an empty room, and closed it after they had entered.

"Now," said Mr. Ransome, "let us see if the young head can teach the old head. What have you discovered?"

"The first thing," answered Ralph, "is that you are a detective, and are playing the innocent dodge."

"There is no sharpness in that, my lad. I as much as told you that."

"The next thing is that you're working some

game on this man Benson. Why, you're as open as a baby with him, letting him into all your plans. It's a queer dodge for a detective to tell all his game to an outsider." Ralph shook his head doubtfully.

Mr. Ransome laughed.

"You think I am working a traverse on him, then?"

"I know it."

"Very good. I'll let you into one point of our trade. Where you find a man too sharp to be cheated by cunning, you can sometimes fool him by innocence. There is no better way to set a rogue on the wrong track than by seeming to take him into the confidence of the law."

"I knew it," declared Ralph. "You suspect him, and don't want him to know it?"

"I want the little fish to show me the way to the big fish."

"I see it all. What's more, Mr. Ransome, I know you're on the right road."

"You do, eh?"

"I can tell you this much. It was Benson that got the trunks mixed up, and sent the old judge's trunk astray, to be plundered."

"Very good. I suspected as much. You're a sharp fellow, Ralph. What was on that paper which you slipped from Benson's pocket?"

Ralph looked up in utter astonishment. He suddenly gained a new respect for Mr. Ransome's ability.

"You didn't see that?" he faltered.

The detective laughed.

"That is part of my business, Ralph. You didn't fancy I had my eyes shut? I had designs on that document myself, but you got ahead of me."

"Well, if you ain't wide awake there's no use talking! Maybe you can tell me what it means. I've been puzzling over it for two hours, and I can't make head or tail of it."

"Written in some secret language, eh?"

"You bet it is! He'll be a smart coon that can see through it."

"Let me see it. I know you were wise enough to return the original to Benson's pocket. But you have a copy."

Ralph looked up in new surprise. Did nothing escape the glance of those sharp eyes? He extracted a copy of the document from his pocket, and spread it out on the table.

"There it is," he said. "There isn't much of it. And shoot me if I can see a scrap of sense in it."

"It is part of our trade to read cipher writing," remarked the detective, drawing the paper toward him. "Let me see what I can make of it."

He cast his eyes on the document, which Ralph had copied from memory.

"In handsome actions lie good deeds. At five miles you cannot bring down your bird. Broad chestnuts are the best for roasting. Saturday afternoon is everybody's holiday."

Mr. Ransome's bushy brows contracted as he bent over the strange communication. Ralph watched him eagerly. He was anxious to know what it meant. Yet he did not care to have his puzzle quickly solved by another.

The detective's observation continued scarcely a minute. Then a quick flash of intelligence spread over his features. He hastily drew out his watch, and looked at the time.

"Half-past four, and after," he exclaimed. "There is not a minute to lose! There is work for you, my boy. I must not be seen in it, and you must be very sly."

"What?" exclaimed Ralph. "You don't want to say that you have read that already?"

"That? Oh yes! That is mere child's play."

"What does it mean, then?"

"It is only a school-boy's cipher. You have merely to take the first two words from each sentence, and join them together. See here."

He hastily wrote on the bottom of the paper: "In handsome. At five. Broad chestnuts. Saturday afternoon."

"I can't see that it's much better than it was before," declared Ralph, still puzzled.

"Suppose we change that a little, and make it read this way: 'In hansom. At five. Broad and Chestnut. On Saturday afternoon.' Is it any clearer now?"

The boy sprang up, and struck his hand vigorously on his knee.

"Well, you are smart! Why couldn't I see that? It's as plain as the nose on a man's face!"

"You haven't learned the art, my good fellow," answered the detective. "This is part of our profession. I will tell you the true inwardness of it. This paper was left as a guide to Benson to put him on the track of his associates. One or the other of them is to be waiting in a

hansom, at Broad and Chestnut streets, at five o'clock this afternoon, for to-day is Saturday. Benson is to meet them there. It is fifteen minutes to five now. There is not a second to lose. Hurry up there, Ralph. Use your eyes as I know you can. But take care you are not suspected."

"Shall I—"

"Not a word. There is no time for instructions. You must trust to your own judgment. Off with you."

His tone was imperative. But the occasion required it. Ralph seized his hat from the table, and left the room like a shot.

Mr. Ransome followed, tearing the paper into minute fragments as he did so.

"That boy is anything but a fool," he remarked. "He has in him the making of a sharp detective. I fancy I will find him a useful assistant."

Ralph hurried up Chestnut street as rapidly as the crowd which obstructed the street would permit. He reached Broad street a minute or two after the hour of five. He looked eagerly around. There, on the corner opposite him stood a hansom cab, the driver perched on an elevated seat in the rear.

The carriage was occupied by a single person. At this distance Ralph could not make him out very well. He saw that he wore a high-crowned white hat, that he had a long, drooping mustache, and that he sported eye-glasses.

"That is not my man," he said, to himself. "But it is after five, and there is no other hansom."

At this instant a person stopped and spoke to the stranger. Ralph's face lighted up with satisfaction. He recognized the well-known features of Benson. He started diagonally across the street, with the hope that he might conceal himself behind the carriage and overhear the conversation.

He was mistaken. After a word or two, Benson sprang into the cab beside its occupant, gave the word to the driver, and they were off at full speed.

Ralph, startled and annoyed, ran for a few steps after them. But he quickly saw that pursuit was useless. There was no other cab at hand in which to follow. He could have punched his own head for vexation. To have the bird in his very grasp, and let it fly him in this fashion! It was certainly provoking. Yet there was nothing more to be done. The game was ended, so far as this part of it went.

Depressed and crestfallen, Ralph turned on his heel, and retraced his steps down Chestnut street.

He had not gone far before he met Mr. Ransome, who was coming up the street. A look at the boy's face told the shrewd detective of the failure of the enterprise. He drew Ralph aside from the crowd.

"Didn't work. I see that," he said, with some vexation of tone. "Were you too late?"

Ralph replied by telling just what happened.

"There was a stranger in the cab," he declared.

"Don't be too sure of that," smiled Mr. Ransome. "The fellow we are after has more faces than there are days in the week. But you have not been so unsuccessful as you imagine. We know his present disguise. That is something. And they went in a hansom. Would you know the vehicle again?"

"I think I would know the driver."

"Very well. Their stand is just around the corner here. There is nothing but to wait for the return of this particular hansom, and question the driver as to where he left his fare."

This suggestion was at once acted upon. The confederates proceeded to the open space under the depot of the Pennsylvania Railroad, which serves as a stand for the hansom cabs.

They waited here in patience for more than an hour, narrowly observing the faces of every driver who returned from a trip.

"There he is. That's our man," cried Ralph, at length, as another cab wheeled in.

Mr. Ransome stepped quietly up to the driver, and opened a conversation with him. After five minutes he returned to Ralph.

"Very dubious," he said. "They got out in the open street, at Franklin and Girard. I fear we have lost our clew."

CHAPTER XII.

PICKING UP LOOSE THREADS.

"It is a forlorn hope, Ralph," said the detective, "but we cannot afford to leave a stone unturned. So far these keen scoundrels have got the best of us. They have broken the trail. We must try and take it up again."

"They left the cab at the corner of Franklin and Girard. Isn't that the spot to scout for them?"

Mr. Ransome shook his head.

"I am afraid you were seen," he answered.

"If so they may have driven there as a blind." "It is worth looking after, anyhow. Somebody may have seen them and noticed their movements."

"Go ahead, then. If you can discover any trace, so much the better."

Ralph darted off eagerly. He felt something of the instinct of the bloodhound in his desire to run the fugitives to earth. The detective smiled to himself as he saw the eagerness of his assistant.

"It is utterly useless," he remarked. "These are not the sort to leave an open trail. But it is good experience for the boy and will keep him warm in the chase. So let him try it."

He walked back to the hotel. There was an idea in his head which he wished to put into practice. Benson was gone. Would he return? That depended on what he had left behind him. It was desirable to examine his trunk.

Ralph meanwhile proceeded rapidly to the point indicated. It was a busy corner. Market sheds occupied the center of the streets in which a Saturday night market was in active play. Rows of stores ran along each side. A busy throng of people moved up and down the avenue. Ralph whistled as he looked around him. It was like hunting the traditional needle in the haystack.

On one corner was a grocery-store. The grocer's boy sat on an empty box on the pavement, drumming with his heels while waiting for a job. Ralph accosted him at a venture.

"Been here long?" he asked.

"Bout five foot six," answered the boy with a leer. "Ain't goin' round measurin' folks, are you?"

Ralph laughed as if this were a very good joke. He seated himself on the box beside the boy and assumed a very confidential manner.

"I'm looking for my uncle," he announced.

"Come up this way about an hour ago in a hansom. See anything of it?"

"A hansom? What's a hansom?"

"It's one of those new style, one-horse cabs, with the driver stuck up on a French roof of a seat behind. The queerest jiggers out. Guess you must have seen them."

"Well, I should smile if I hadn't. One of 'em stopped jest here 'bout an hour ago, and let out two men."

Ralph's heart throbbed with expectation, but he forced himself to appear calm.

"Like enough that's the one I was looking for. Did you notice which way they went?"

"I went out on an arrand. When I come back they were standin' on the curb yet, chaffing away."

"One of them was an oldish man, with a red face. The other had on a white hat, and a regular Frenchy mustache."

"Sure as shootin'" answered the grocer's boy. "That's them."

"Did you hear what they had to say?"

"Well, I've a notion I've got other business than spyin' round folks. What do you take me for?" demanded the offended boy.

"It's only my uncle," declared Ralph. "See here. You heard something. It's worth a quarter to me to know what."

He balanced a shining silver coin on his finger. The boy's eyes opened in surprise and cupidity.

"I only heard a few words," he faltered.

"Pitch them out then. I'm good for the quarter."

"I heard the old fellow say: 'They don't twig. They're showing me their whole hand.' And he laughed as if it was a high-up joke."

"What did the young one say to that?"

"Look out," he says. 'You're playin' with fire.' Then the old chap answered, 'I must get my trunk away.' He said something too about 'best to have a friend on the ground.' That was about all I heard."

"Are you sure? Think again."

"There wasn't another word. Except I heard the young chap say something about Barclay street, in a kind of whisper."

"Barclay street!" exclaimed Ralph. "Are you sure of the name?"

"Bet I am."

"Good. Here's the quarter. What became of them afterwards?"

"The old fellow got into a Franklin street car, and rode down-town. The young chap walked up Girard avenue, with as spruce an air as if he owned the street."

"Hey, Tom!" came a cry from the store.

"Guess I'm wanted," cried the boy. "That's all anyhow. Good-by."

Ralph walked slowly away, inwardly debating on what he had learned. The boy had not overheard much, but what he had heard was significant. Barclay street. What did that mean? Ralph knew the street well. It was a short street, of no very good reputation. It ran but one or two squares in length.

It was half-past seven in the evening when he regained the hotel. He was hungry after his active service, and repaired at once to the supper room. He was not half-through his meal when Mr. Ransome strolled in and took a seat at the same table.

"What luck?" he asked, first looking around to see that there was no one within hearing.

"The trail's broken; but we can take it up again," answered Ralph.

"Ah! How?"

"Benson will be back here."

"I know he will."

It was Ralph's turn to be surprised.

"How do you know that?" he asked.

"Simply because I have examined his trunk. I did not find in it any stolen goods, but its contents were too valuable to be abandoned, except in case of necessity. He will be back after it, since he does not know that he is suspected."

"Just what he said," remarked Ralph.

"What he said? You don't mean to say that you have seen him, and overheard him talking? Come, come, you smart young rogue. Let me have your story."

Ralph laughed, as he continued to eat his supper.

"You thought I was on a wild-goose chase. Anyhow, I haven't come back without some feathers from my goose."

He very deliberately sipped his tea, quietly enjoying the impatience of the detective.

"You are a ridiculously slow young villain," growled the latter. "Quick, before we are interrupted."

Ralph began to laugh.

"It is not a very long story," he remarked. "Guess I'll let you have it."

He proceeded to tell the result of his exploration. Mr. Ransome listened intently. He sat in silence for a minute or two after Ralph had ended.

"Well," asked the youth, impatient in his turn. "Is there anything in it?"

"Not much of importance. It has turned out just as I expected. What they said told us nothing more than we already know. Yes, there was one thing. That street name. That may give us a useful clew. Do you know the street?"

"Yes. It is a short one, not more than a square or two long. I have heard say it is a resort of doubtful characters."

"Good. Very good. That is our next starting-point. We may pick up the broken end of our thread—Hush! Here comes Benson!"

Ralph fancied that the detective must have eyes in the back of his head. Otherwise how could he have seen a man who had entered the room exactly behind him. He could not repress his curiosity.

"How did you see him?" he asked. "He is behind you."

"It is a way I have of looking around corners," laughed the detective. "Don't you see there is a looking-glass in front of me?"

He gave an order to a waiter who was passing. Mr. Benson, who had indeed made his appearance, looked for a minute undecidedly about the room. He then walked over to the table occupied by Ralph and the detective.

"Room for a third?" he asked.

"Yes. Will be glad to have you join us. I have just ordered a snack."

The new-comer gave his order, and then turned to his companions.

"How goes the search?" he asked pleasantly.

"Any clew yet?"

Mr. Ransome shook his head doubtfully.

"It is just as I told you yesterday," he answered. "We have to deal with a pair of the spriest rogues in this country. That girl, Norah Bouncer, would make her mark in any country; and her husband isn't much behind her."

"Sherman isn't their right name, then?" queried Ralph.

"No, no. It is only one out of a dozen. They know me well, and that I am after them. I fancy they have left the city. I have ordered the hotels to be watched, however. It is possible they may have dropped down somewhere else, under a disguise."

"How would your spies know them, in that case?" questioned Mr. Benson.

"He would be a poor detective that couldn't tell at first sight that a man was sporting a disguise. We are a little sharper than you give us credit for."

Mr. Benson smiled as he addressed himself to his supper. He seemed to have some doubts as to the ability of the detective service. "They all know how to blow their own trumpets," he said to himself.

"Of course, we have more than one string to our bow," continued Mr. Ransome, as he looked cautiously around him. "I can place confidence in you?"

"Certainly. I am with you in this business, straight through," replied Benson.

"Here too," added Ralph.

"Then the fact is, I am strongly inclined to believe that old Bluebottle is a confederate of the thieves."

"You don't tell me that?"

"I thought he had been victimized at first," continued the detective with a very confidential manner. "But the evidence was very direct against him. That ribbon in particular, which Mrs. Mason swore to. He's a confounded old rogue, that's my opinion."

"I see; I see," declared Mr. Benson. "Very well judged. And by watching him you may strike the track of the others."

"Just so. That's my idea exactly."

"But hardly while he's under suspicion."

"Let me alone for that," and Mr. Ransome laughed cunningly. "I have set him right on that point. The magistrate has already discharged the case against him as lacking proof. I am going to be very innocent and confiding with the old scoundrel."

"To seem to shut your eyes when you have them widest open, eh?"

"Just so, just so. That's a mighty sweet cut of steak. You had better try some of it, Benson."

"Thank you; but chops are my favorite."

Ralph walked away, in some doubt whether the detective was not rubbing it in too thickly. There was something in Benson's manner that made the lad fancy that he was playing a part.

"Don't do to take a man for a fool," he growled. "Mr. Ransome's smart, and his plan is a good one. But he's too sweetly confidential with Benson. He unloads too easily."

We must leap over the events of the succeeding days, in which nothing of importance occurred. Ransome attached himself to the old judge, as he had declared was his intention, and helped him to swear against the confounded laws of the Quaker City. Yet despite all this Ralph noticed traces of uneasiness about Benson. He was evidently suspicious.

It was late Tuesday afternoon when the lad came excitedly to his confederate.

"Benson smells a rat," he declared. "He has just paid his bill and ordered his trunk to be sent to the Pennsylvania Railroad."

"I know it," answered Mr. Ransome coolly. "The game is growing ripe. Are you at leisure, Ralph? I want your aid."

"All right. I'm in on this job."

"Then hurry out to the railroad station. See the officer stationed there and give him this warrant. Point out Benson to him if he enters the station, but keep out of sight yourself."

"And what is to be done?"

"Tell him, if Benson attempts to take a train, to arrest him on the spot."

"Very well. And if he doesn't?"

"Watch him like a hawk. If he leaves the station follow him. Take care he does not throw you off the track, as he did before."

"I will do my best," answered Ralph.

An hour after he was watching Mr. Benson from a retired corner of the extensive station. The latter rested, with his head on his hand, for some time, until the station attendants announced the Pittsburg Express.

He then rose and walked out as if to take the cars. Ralph quickly signaled to the officer. Benson walked toward the gate with the watchdog of the law at his heels, ready, if he should take a step through, to drop a startling hand upon his shoulder. At a distance Ralph looked on, with eager eyes.

CHAPTER XIII.

RUNNING THE FOX TO EARTH.

Two men were seated in the smoking-room of the Grand Central Hotel, engaged in the pleasure of a chat and the joy of a cigar. They consisted of Mr. Ransome, the detective and Judge Bluebottle. The latter had not yet got over his indignation at his arrest.

"By the jumping Jehosaphat, there's no use trying soft sawder on me!" he declared. "I'm

going to make things lively, now you bet. Guess folks round here don't know what kind of a catamount they wake up when they scratch this 'coon. If I don't make them see stars there's no use talking."

"Oh, come, come, judge," said the officer soothingly. "You must not bear malice. It's not according to Scripture."

"Scripture be— Excuse me. I've got nothing ag'in' Scripture. But there's no use trying to shove the Bible down my throat. Don't tell me! There ain't a case like this one in it."

"It says when a man strikes you on one cheek you must turn him the other."

"Turn him the other? Me? If a man slaps me on one ear I'm to turn him the other? The blessed stars! Just you get somebody to try it on, and you'll see a lively time. Why, if I wouldn't kick the rooster into the middle of next week, hang me for a blowing old 'possum!"

"I thought you were a better Christian than that, judge."

"So I am. I'm a sound Christian. There ain't a sweeter temper this side of Jericho if folks only let me alone. But I won't stand no nonsense. No, siree. I want— Oh, the deuce!"

He suddenly sprang up and danced in a lively manner around the room. In his excitement he had put the wrong end of the cigar to his lips, with very unpleasant consequences.

Ere he got over the excitement at the unlucky accident a telegraph messenger boy entered, and approached Mr. Ransome, handing him a dispatch.

The latter quickly read it, with a marked change of expression. He had been stretched out in a very easy and comfortable attitude, quietly enjoying the old fellow's blustering ways, but he now brought his chair down with a crash, flung his half-smoked cigar in the spittoon, and sprang to his feet.

"Come, judge," he exclaimed. "I have told you who are the thieves, and where your stolen goods are likely to be found. Our apple is dead ripe and ready to tumble. Are you with me for a ride? I'm going for them."

"Jolly boy! I'm your boss straight through."

"How soon can you be ready? Within five minutes?"

"I'm ready now. A chap that sleeps on the prairie has got to be ready at the flash."

"Good. Wait for me then."

He hurried out of the room, stopped for a moment at the clerk's desk to speak to Mr. Jones, and then hastened to his room. He was back inside the time mentioned. Meanwhile a carriage had been drawn up at the door of the hotel, and Mr. Jones and the judge were prepared to accompany him on his mysterious journey.

The telegram he had received was from Ralph Ready. It was to the following effect:

"Our bird has flown back. Slid the train and took a carriage. Getting his trunk on. I'm going to follow him hot in a hansom."

What there was in this that gave warrant for such a hasty excursion, did not appear. But the detective had been busy during the last few days and had learned a thing or two. He now felt sure of caging his birds.

We must, however, return to Ralph, whom we left at a somewhat critical moment. Benson continued to advance toward the station-gate. The officer followed, with upraised hand. A step more, and it would have fallen on the shoulder of the unsuspecting victim.

But just at this moment Benson stopped, glanced cautiously around him, and then hastened to the elevator, which was about to descend to the lower floor of the station. Ralph and the officer ran for the stairs, shouldering their way rudely through the crowded room.

When they reached the lower floor Benson had already disappeared. But in a minute after they recovered him. He had hailed a carriage, which was drawn up to the outer door of the baggage-room, and was engaged in having his trunk extracted from the heap of baggage.

"Good!" exclaimed Ralph. "I have my man now. Let me have that warrant, please. I'll run him down if I have to chase him for a week. Will you send a telegraph message for me? I can't lose sight of my bird."

"Certainly," answered the officer.

Taking a scrap of paper from his pocket Ralph hastily scrawled off a message for Mr. Ransome, at the Grand Central. Handing this to the officer, he accosted the driver of a hansom, which stood close by.

"See here, my friend. Do you notice that carriage at the baggage-room?"

"Yes," was the answer.

"Do you think you can keep it in sight?"

"Well, I should judge. There ain't the blood in them horses to get away from this pony of mine."

"Keep it in sight, then. But don't let them see they are followed. I will make it worth your while."

Ralph got into the low-bodied carriage, drew the lap curtain up so as nearly to conceal him, and jerked his hat down low over his eyes.

He was hardly comfortably seated when Mr. Benson, having succeeded in recovering his trunk, took a keen observation of the street before entering his carriage. He evidently saw nothing suspicious. Ralph was concealed behind the corner of the station building. The fugitive stepped into his carriage. The door closed with a sharp clang. It drove rapidly off.

The next instant the hansom drew out from its stand, and turned into the street. The chase was in full play.

It was a sharp morning in late September. The wind cut severely as they drove rapidly onward. But this went for nothing. They had no time now to think of the weather. Some hundred yards separated the two carriages. This distance the driver of the hansom maintained. He stirred up when the chase turned a corner, but lagged behind again when it kept a straight course. Thus they proceeded for a mile or two, in a northerly direction.

"Straight as a die. No winding, and no tricks. He thinks the coast is clear, or he would be trying some game. Had his eyes shut up, after all."

So soliloquized Ralph as the pursuit continued. They were now in an up-town business-street. The carriage wheeled in to the curb and came to a stop.

"Shall I draw up?" asked Ralph's coachman.

"Thunder, no! It will look suspicious. Keep right on. But use your eyes."

They drove past the halted carriage. Its late occupant stood on the pavement. The coachman had thrown his reins on the horses, and was handling the trunk, as if with the intention to land it. The hansom drove on, Ralph crouching so as to conceal his face and form.

They proceeded at a jog-trot onward for some distance. Ralph looked heedfully back. The coachman had landed the trunk, and was carrying it into the store before which the carriage stood. Mr. Benson had disappeared.

"Draw up here," cried Ralph.

He sprang briskly to the pavement as the hansom stopped. He looked back. The driver of the other carriage was again on his box, and was drawing out from the curb. He seemed intending to turn his horses and drive back to his stand. Mr. Benson was not in sight.

"That's plain sailing," cried Ralph. "A chap needs no chart to follow that craft. My man has landed in that store. Wait a minute. I will be back and pay you."

He hurried back. The other carriage had now turned, and was moving back over its late course. The next minute Ralph was keenly gazing into the store which he was satisfied held the object of his pursuit.

He was right in one respect. There sat the trunk on the store floor. But Mr. Benson was not in sight.

The youthful scout bustled in. Nobody was present but a well-grown girl, who seemed the only attendant upon the establishment.

"Where is the owner of this trunk?" he cried, in a sharp tone.

"What do you mean? He is not here," answered the girl.

"Not here?"

"No. He left the trunk, and went away again in the carriage."

"That's all stuff," cried the boy angrily.

"Do you know that you are receiving stolen goods? You will get into trouble if you don't out with the truth instant!"

"Stolen goods?" The girl's eyes opened wide in fear and surprise. "Why, sir, he only left it here on storage. I don't know him, indeed I don't. He went right away again."

The confounded boy looked in her face. It was evident that she was telling the truth. He rushed back to the store door. The carriage had disappeared. His own cab was slowly coming down the street, the cabman a trifle anxious about his fare.

Ralph sprang out hastily.

"Fooled!" he cried. "Fooled the worst way! He's in the carriage still!"

"The deuce! And it's given us the slip."

"Pull up." Ralph leaped alertly into the hansom. "Now listen to me. Do you know where Barclay street is?"

"I'd be a gay driver if I didn't."

"Then drive straight there. And keep an

eye open for the carriage. You may bring it up again. Let out like wild."

Off once more they went, the driver using his whip freely. His sorry-looking but active animal made lively time, darting onward at an unusual pace for a cab-horse. Ten minutes' sharp driving brought them to the desired part of the city.

"No signs of the chase?" asked Ralph.

"Nothing sure. Just saw a carriage away off ahead."

"We are nigh Barclay street?"

"We'll be there in a minute."

"All right. Don't drive into it. Pull up and move slowly past. And don't forget that you've got a pair of eyes."

"Ay, ay!"

The street in question ran at right angles to the one in which they were. It was a rather narrow street, bordered on each side with dwelling-houses. Both used their eyes sharply as they drove at a slow pace past its opening.

Ralph's idea had not been in vain. There stood a carriage, drawn up before a house midway of the square. In a moment more they had passed the street-opening, and the view was lost.

"How is it?" cried Ralph. "Is it the same carriage?"

"You bet it is. I know it like a book. It's Paddy Lynch's team."

"You know it, eh? That's good. Hold up. I hear it coming. Just you nail Paddy, and make him say at what house he left his fare."

"I'll do just that. He'll tell me, never fear."

They went on at a walk. In a minute more the carriage turned into the street in which they were and came slowly on. Ralph's driver hailed the coachman, with a cheery call.

"The top of the morning to you, Paddy."

"Where's your fare?"

"Hillo, Tom! I jist unloaded up Barclay street."

"What number?"

"What's that your business?"

"Only I want to know."

"Then guess. You're allers too ready with your questions, Tom."

Ralph thrust his head from the carriage. He held a silver dollar between his fingers.

"Tell me the number then," he demanded.

"This for you if you answer square."

"It's a bargain," cried the delighted coachman; "1036 is the number. Hand over the needful."

"Done. And here's for you." He thrust some money into the hand of his driver. "That will do. You needn't wait."

He sprang out and hurried back, leaving the two coachmen to talk over the strangeness of the whole affair.

CHAPTER XIV.

DIGGING INTO THE FOXES' COVER.

WITHIN a room of 1036 Barclay street sat three persons. Two of them were evidently the persons who had so adroitly humbugged Ralph Ready, but greatly changed in appearance.

The shy, simpering boy who had so neatly played the part of a bashful young husband was now a wide-awake man. He had discarded the spectacles and mustache of his late disguise, but was dressed in the rig of a young sport, and seemed fit to hold his own in any situation.

His wife, Mrs. Sherman, or Norah Bouncer, as the detective had called her, also seemed to have grown ten years older, and had quite thrown off that helpless, girlish expression which had worked so on Ralph's sympathies.

The third person of the party was Mr. Benson. They sat around a table on which were spread out several articles, including parcels of bank-notes and of official-looking papers.

They were just now laughing as at some amusing joke.

"You never saw anybody so sweetly confidential as Ransome was," said Mr. Benson.

"Why the man swallowed me right in. He told me all his plans, and did not take a step without consulting me. It was like the hound consulting the fox."

"The old fellow must be losing his wits," answered Sherman. "He is counted out West one of the sharpest men going."

"So he is," cried the lady. "There's no steel-trap that is sharper. I'm afraid of that man." She shook her head doubtfully. "He has followed us up like a cat follows a mouse. It wouldn't surprise me if he walked in here on us within the next hour."

"I'll go a picayune he didn't follow us," rejoined her husband. "If he didn't track Benson."

"Track me? Not much! I'm too old a bird for that. I kept my eyes open, I promise you. Hal my trunk sent to the station, and went for the train. Played that as a blind, but didn't twig any spotters. Anyhow, I slipped away, took a carriage, and got out my trunk."

"And drove straight here?"

"Well, I should judge not. Not quite that green, thank you. There was a hansom that seemed to be going the same way as I was. I didn't quite like that, so I played a little traverse. I jumped off and had my trunk carried into a store. Just as I expected, the hansom drove past and stopped just ahead. I slipped quietly into the carriage, again telling the coachman to turn and drive back homeward."

"Did you see who was in the hansom?"

"You bet I did. I kept my eyes open, I promise you. Hang me, if it was anybody but that smart young chap from the hotel! The little rat shot back for the store, while I drove away."

"The young idiot. He's sharper than I fancied," said Mrs. Sherman.

"He's no fool. But he was playing with an old fox. At any rate that was the last I saw of the hansom. I got safe away while he was following up the blind trail of the trunk."

They all broke again into a laugh at this. The young detective had apparently been neatly fooled.

"Business is the next thing in the programme," continued Benson. "We've worked the game, so far, very neatly. There's nothing now but a square divide and a scattering for safer quarters."

"Old Bluebottle bled well," cried Mrs. Sherman, with a laugh, as she laid her hand on the bundle of papers. "You worked the cards neatly, in sending us his trunk."

"Did you have any trouble in opening it?"

"I would like to see the lock I couldn't open. We came near being caught, though. The porter came for the trunk just as were investigating it."

"I know, I know," laughed Benson. "I have heard the whole story. But you never saw a madder coon than the old judge when he was arrested. He's done nothing but swear vengeance since."

"Poor old devil!" They laughed merrily at the good joke of having the chief victim held for the thief.

"Now," said Mr. Sherman, putting on a business air, "let us get down to work. It is not best to waste time on this part of the job. Here is an inventory of our plunder. You will find everything down there to the least fraction."

He passed to Benson a long strip of paper covered with close writing. The latter examined it with an experienced eye.

"That seems all right," he remarked. "We can make an easy divide of the smaller plunder. I suppose Norah will go for those laces."

"I don't think you would care to wear them," she answered.

"Hardly. But I want their equivalent in cash. We must fix a selling price on them. However, this is the heavy weight of the business." He laid his hand on the bundle of papers. "They are dangerous stuff to handle."

"Nonsense," we can get rid of them in New York," answered Sherman. "I know the fence that will buy them. At a big discount, of course."

"Bless us, didn't old Bluebottle rave about them?" laughed Benson—"and I don't wonder. They are all securities that can be managed by a careful hand. By the way, Norah, that was a shrewd trick of yours to drop that piece of red ribbon in his trunk. It was that nailed the business on him. It was sworn to by one of the victims."

"Red ribbon?" cried Norah, in surprise. "I did nothing of the kind. By the way, I missed a piece of ribbon from my hair. Oh mercy! could it be—"

She burst into a loud laugh at the thought that the old man had been convicted of theft by the lost ribbon of the thief.

"You don't tell me that? Why, one of the lady witnesses swore to it positively."

"Good! I wonder if they will convict old Bluebottle on the strength of it! That would be a shame. I hope the old fellow will be let off."

"That is a very proper sentiment in you, Mrs. Sherman."

These words came from a new voice. The door, which had stood partly ajar, was now wide open, and their startled eyes beheld on the threshold no less a person than Ralph Ready, a very knowing look upon his face.

The three thieves sprung to their feet, with

cries of alarm. These speedily became oaths. Sherman darted forward, as if with intent to assail the venturesome youth. But he stopped suddenly, on facing the muzzle of a pistol in that young man's hand.

"Just hold your level," remarked Ralph, pleasantly; "and let me give you a bit of advice. The next time you've got plunder to divide, lock your door. Guess I'll take a hand in this split, if you don't mind."

He stepped up to the table and seized the inventory of the stolen goods. The villains were utterly taken aback. They retired before Ralph's pistol, cowed but cursing. Even the pretty lips of Mrs. Sherman gave vent to some very strong exclamations.

"That trunk trick didn't work, Benson," continued Ralph. "I'm a young hand, but I'm not quite a fool. Back with you, now! Drop your hand! If you show a weapon I'll bore you!"

The villains had got over their first alarm, and showed signs of belligerent intentions. Sherman and Benson advanced together.

"One step more, and down goes your house," warned Ralph, with his finger on the trigger.

He had too many to cover. Norah had taken advantage of the opportunity to slip nimbly behind him. In an instant her arms were flung around him with a strength which she did not seem to possess.

In the surprise of the moment the pistol was discharged, the ball going through the ceiling. Ere he could aim it again it was dashed from his hand, and he was a captive in the grasp of his foes.

"Tie him to the chair! Gag him! Knock the spy in the head!"

Such were the various exclamations which came from Ralph's captors. He was held too firmly to resist, though he showed no intention of doing so. He was, on the contrary, alarmingly cool.

"He has confederates," cried Norah in alarm. "That pistol-shot was unlucky. We must run with the plunder. Tie him and leave him."

"And how about dear, sly little Roger?" asked Ralph sarcastically. "Won't you leave me the tootsy-wootsy for company?"

"Take care Roger don't punch your head, you young ape," cried that gentleman, angrily.

He began to sweep together the spoil that lay spread out on the table.

A slight noise was audible below. Footsteps sounded on the stairs.

"I forgot to tell you," said Ralph, "that I advised the good lady of the house what sort of folks her boarders were. I sent her for help. Likely that's the help coming."

The alarmed thieves, startled by this information, released their prisoner, and rushed hastily for the door which the footsteps were approaching.

They were too late. The door was suddenly filled with a group of men, before whom they retired in dismay. For foremost of these men came Mr. Ransome, the detective, while behind him Mr. Jones and Judge Bluebottle pushed into the room.

"It won't work," said the detective, in his cool manner, his fingers toying with a pistol. "I've had a long chase, but I've run you to earth at last. You may as well fling up the sponge, for I've come here to take you."

"And may I be keelhaunched for a blow-hard, if you haven't hit the mark square center!" roared Judge Bluebottle, rushing forward. "For if there ain't my certificates then you can kick me into a pancake for a blazing old liar!" He sprang to the table as he spoke, and grasped his lost treasures with outspread hands.

The discomfited thieves had retired into a corner of the room, utterly cowed by their discomfiture.

"Step out here now, lively," commanded the detective, in a brisk tone. "You know me, and that I won't stand any foolishness. I haven't tracked you for a thousand miles for nothing. Just drop that little rib-tickler, friend Roger, or you may get hurt. And step this way, Norah. I hate to put such rough bracelets on a lady's wrists; but I happen to know your old tricks."

No resistance was made. In a moment the chopfallen thieves were all handcuffed. There was that in the eye of the detective that took from them all idea of resistance.

"As for you, friend Benson," he remarked, "I am sorry to have fooled you a little. But I wasn't quite the jolly green you took me for."

The only reply of the secured thief was a volley of curses, in which he was echoed by Roger. As for Norah, she crouched back in a chair, with a fierce, tigerish glare in her blue

eyes. She seemed the most dangerous of the three.

"How in the world did you get here, Ralph?" asked Mr. Jones, in surprise.

"I trailed the fox to his home," answered Ralph. "But I don't see how you nosed out the hole."

"Let me alone for that, Ralph," laughed the detective. "I have not been asleep since you gave me the cue of Barclay street. Have only been waiting to catch all my birds in the nest. Bless us, if they haven't had good pickings! Mr. Jones, will you take charge of the stolen goods? There they lie handy."

Judge Bluebottle had by this time possessed himself of his papers, and of one of the two piles of bank-notes that lay on the table.

"Them's my perquisites," he declared.

"Guess I'll freeze on to that part of the plunder. And wouldn't I give the whole of it to have these sinners brought up before me in my court at Duluth? I bet you high I'd railroad them in a mighty lively fashion."

"Hold your tongue, you bloated old bluebottle fly!" screamed Norah in a rage. "I'll get even with you yet for this! See if I don't! With the whole of you! With every one of you!"

"All right, Norah," answered the detective coolly. "But you will have a little time to think over it first. Come, this part of the play is over."

He left the room, followed docilely by his prisoners. Mr. Jones and Ralph gathered up the stolen goods and followed. The old judge brought up the rear, vowing what he would do if he only had them all out in Duluth.

We need not dwell on the sequel. The facts of the robbery were too patent for any defense to be made by the prisoners. Every article was recognized by the various victims of the theft, and a sentence of six years each to the State's Prison followed a short trial and a rapid condemnation.

"And after that term is over they are wanted in the West," announced Mr. Ransome. "There's a neat little charge hanging over them in Illinois, and another in Ohio. I fancy the traveling public will be safe from their depredations for some long years to come."

"Hang me if you ain't a sharp one, Ransome!" cried old Bluebottle. "And I never saw a cooler duck. Why don't you emigrate to Duluth? There's a pretty field out that way. And you, too, boys. I like you. Come out there and I'll make your fortune."

"How about the quarter you owe me, judge?" laughed Ralph.

"You shall have it. By blazes you shall! Just come out to my office in Duluth."

"Better come with me to Toledo," remarked Mr. Ransome. "You have the making of a detective, my lad. I would like to take you under instruction in the business."

"You can't have him," answered Mr. Jones. "The Grand Central is not ready to spare him."

"Let the boy speak for himself," responded the detective.

"Guess I'll stick where I am," answered Ralph. "Don't know what I'll do when I get a few more years on my shoulders. May take in Toledo and Duluth both. But just now the Grand Central is big enough to hold me."

And so ends our story. Ralph, now a man, is still in the Grand Central. He has not yet started on that trip West, which he fully intends to take some day.

THE END.

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